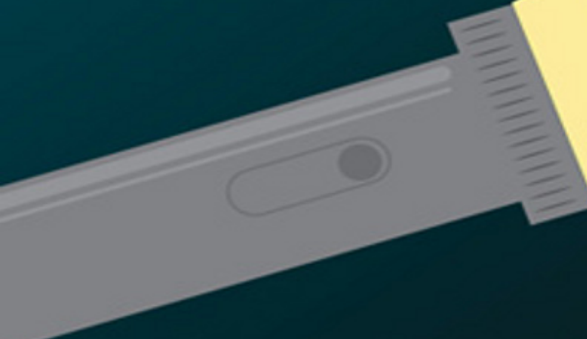


A MYSTERIOUSPRESS.COM BOOK



STUART PALMER

A
HILDEGARDE
WITHERS
MYSTERY



Murder
on Wheels



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A Hildegarde Withers Mystery

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INTEGRATED MEDIA

NEW YORK

To the memory of Paddlewings who made his last—and first—flight in
October 1931, this book is affectionately dedicated

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I

Jack-in-the-Box

LIKE THE NOTE OF a pitch-pipe between the lips of some mad, unearthly chorus leader, the traffic officer's whistle sounded its earsplitting E above high C. Rush hour traffic on the Avenue, which had just been granted a green light, stopped jarringly, with a screech of brakes. All but the open Chrysler roadster, which as Officer Francis X. Doody had noted from the corner of his vigilant blue eye, was veering crazily towards the left instead of keeping on south past the impassive stone lions of the Library as was its proper course ...

Officer Doody took the whistle out of his mouth and bellowed "Hey!" But the echoes were still sounding back their flattened versions of his blast when there came a sickening crash of tortured glass and metal. The open blue Chrysler had come to rest with its front end inextricably entangled with the fender of a northbound Yellow taxi.

"Where do you think you're goin'?" Doody spoke his piece by rote as he strode wearily over toward the scene of the smash. He jerked the white gloves from his big red hands as he went, remarking audibly that this was just about what he could have expected of his lousy luck, anyway. As if it wasn't enough, on the tag end of a dreary November afternoon, to have it start snowing just as the crowds were pouring out of shops and office buildings! To cap it all, some dumb driver had to pick the busiest corner in Manhattan to try a forbidden left turn in the middle of a *Go* light. "One damn thing after another!" Doody was mumbling.

Then he stopped suddenly, his arms akimbo. Swiftly the realization came over him that there was something decidedly wrong here, something "phoney" as he himself would have expressed it. Mechanically his lips formed the words ... "One damn thing after another ... "

It was at that moment that this accident began to be different from all other accidents. For there wasn't any driver behind the wheel of the Chrysler roadster. There wasn't anybody in the car at all. It was deserted, wandering, derelict.

Doody walked clear around the wreck, oblivious to the interrupted traffic and to the din of the sirens. His jaw was thrust forward belligerently, but his expedition drew a blank.

“Smart guy, huh?”

But nobody answered him. He rubbed his eyes, half-blinded by the thick falling flakes of the sooty precipitate which passes for snow in Manhattan.

The driver of the wounded taxi scrambled down from his seat at Doody’s command. His name, he insisted, was Al Leech. Doody had a hard time to get him to speak loudly enough to be heard. Somewhere in the vast reaches of his skinny throat his voice seemed to have a way of losing itself. He was naturally small and nervous, and his eyes were unnaturally wild.

Doody took the little man by the shoulder and shook him vigorously, for lack of a better victim.

“Come clean, you! Where did the driver of that Chrysler go?”

The cab-driver swallowed with obvious difficulty, and then pointed up the street. “I saw him, I tell yer! I saw him ... he’s there!”

Doody turned, and at that moment the street lights came on, slightly increasing the confusion without adding greatly to the visibility. “You saw *who where?*”

The cabbie pulled away from Doody’s clutch, still pointing. His grimy finger indicated a spot perhaps thirty yards away, across Forty-second Street and up Fifth a little distance.

Doody rubbed at his eyes again. The snowfall was thickening, and this was the period between the dark and the daylight which Longfellow, in an earlier age, dedicated as “the children’s hour” and which has since been diverted from children to cocktails. The pale yellow glow of the street lamps fought the last of the winter daylight, and a nearby church clock was striking five-thirty.

Even Officer Doody could see that something lay quietly and still in the narrow lane between north and south-bound traffic on the Avenue—something that vaguely resembled a sack, and was not.

Doody took several uncertain steps forward, and then remembered his post of duty. He drew his whistle, let forth a series of staccato blasts, and then waited a moment for an answer. There was no answer. He tried again, and drew another blank.

The street was already jammed enough to block traffic both ways. Let it stay that way for a while, Doody reflected. And he set out on the run toward the gathering crowd which already had surrounded that shapeless sack on the pavement.

He fought his way through the mob, the little cab-driver directly in his rear. For the hundredth time the big cop wondered at the sudden appearance of the curious crowd which always seems to spring out of nowhere, like worms after the rain, at the first cry of an accident.

Halfway through the jam he whirled and caught the cab-driver by the shoulder. "It's an accident case, sure enough," he yelled above the din. "You get to the nearest phone and get an ambulance, quick. Get Bellevue—no, Roosevelt is closer. Scram!"

Obediently the little man turned and dashed toward the corner. By means of a perfect off-tackle plunge, Doody came at last to the bull's eye of the rapidly increasing circle.

"Get back, will yez? What's the trouble here?"

Nobody answered him. They were all looking down, down to the glistening asphalt where a young man lay sprawled out on his back ... a big young man with fair hair. It was a face that would have been thought more than handsome under ordinary circumstances, but it was not handsome now.

He was dressed, this accident case of Doody's, in a thick overcoat of yellow camel's hair, with pigskin gloves on his somewhat small hands and bright tan shoes on his feet. The brim of a crushed felt hat protruded from beneath one shoulder, and a cigarette still burned merrily into the furry overcoat lapel where it must have dropped from lips now black and contorted.

A snappy dresser, this accident case. But there was one detail of his array which did not jibe with Doody's ideas of what the well dressed young man will wear this season. Around his neck, just above the soft pinned collar and the blue-gold tie of printed silk, was another and heavier cravat—a noose of twisted hempen rope!

Doody blew his whistle again, a dozen short sharp blasts. Then he sank slowly to his knees, and touched the face, on which the snowflakes were still melting as they fell. The head rolled loosely, almost too loosely, to one side as he brought his reluctant fingers against the flesh. Then Doody got a grip on the knot in the half-inch rope, and worked it until it came loose in

his hand. But as the rope came away, it left a cruel red stigma around the throat of the young man who lay there on the asphalt.

From the knot, this rope ran off somewhere under the encroaching feet of the multitude. Doody hauled on it vigorously, glad of something definite to get his hands on. With a certain amount of useless advice and assistance from the crowd the end was gathered in, not without an old lady or two being upset in the process.

He had expected to find something at the end of it. It stood to reason that a man can't be hanged unless he is hanged from something. But there was only a binding of fine silk thread, dark blue in color, to keep the end from ravelling.

Doody kicked aside his landlubberly coil, and stared again at that unlovely face which looked rather horribly up at the sky. "Another suicide," he said aloud. "Get back, all of yez! Why don't somebody hunt up the officer on this beat?"

He sent another series of blasts echoing above the howling sirens of the blocked autos, which now were jammed all the way down to the Empire State Building.

"Suicide or not, I got to get the street clear," decided Doody aloud. "Come on, some of you. Give me a hand and we'll get him inside." He pointed to the nearest bystander. "You, there!"

An apple-peddler shook his head vehemently and backed away out of sight. His place in the inner circle of the curious was taken by a youngish man in a derby, whose fingers tugged nervously at a yellow mustache as he saw what lay at his feet. He dropped his brief case, and seemed to have some trouble in taking his eyes from the face of the man who lay in the street.

"Good God, it's Laurie Stait!" The words seemed torn from his lips.

"So? You know him, huh? Well, never mind." Doody motioned imperatively. "Grab his legs. We can't let him lay here in the street."

If the new arrival was willing, he hid it successfully. But Doody insisted. "Come on, if you know him you don't need no introduction. Grab his legs."

He bellowed at the crowd until a narrow lane was formed, and the two of them lifted the unhappy young man to the curb, across the sidewalk, and in through the wide doors of the Enterprise Trust Building.

“Here, you can’t bring that man in here!” shouted the elevator starter. “You can’t do it ... ”

“Horsefeathers,” retorted Doody. “We did do it, see? And you’ll like it.”

The crowd in the lobby was closing in again. One woman screamed that she was about to faint, and then pressed forward for a better view.

The young man with the mustache stood irresolute. “Officer, is he dead?”

“I’m not the medical examiner,” said Doody shortly. “This is the patrolman’s job, not mine. I got to get back on my corner.”

The stranger bent almost unwillingly for a moment over the body, his ear pressed against the heart. He fumbled a bit with the victim’s coat.

“That’s nearer than I’d want to be,” observed somebody in the crowd. The young man bent closer, and then suddenly stood up. “How did this happen?”

“Never mind that” Doody came closer. “You say you know this fellow?”

The stranger stood there, staring at the body.

“Come on, speak up! What’s your name? Friend or relative of the deceased, if he is deceased? What did you say his name was?”

“I—I don’t know, officer.”

“None of that. You said you knew him. Do you know him or don’t you?”

“I don’t know if I know him or not!”

Doody’s homely face wrinkled into a scowl. “Why, you ...” He was interrupted by the speedily increasing wail of an approaching siren. The crowd surged toward the door as a Dodge special-built truck came lurching down the Avenue and skidded to a stop at the curb outside. Doody signalled vigorously with waves of his arm.

It wasn’t the white ambulance that Doody had expected, but a black truck with the red initials P D on the side.

There were three men in the front seat. Two of them wore plain blue uniforms and the other had on a Chesterfield with the collar turned up around his ears.

He slid down to the street and pushed through the crowd. “Heard you had a stiff up here,” he said casually. “Where’s it laying?”

“But I didn’t send for you, Doc. I sent for the ambulance!”

“Yeah? Well, the guy who phoned in said there was a stiff up here. I happened to be down at the Morgue and I thought I’d run up and get it over quick.” He touched the body gently with his foot.

“Pretty, very pretty, Doody my boy. Don’t weep because you didn’t get your ambulance. The interne wouldn’t have taken this carcass aboard anyways. It’s cooling off already.” He knelt down. “Well, I’m a son of a gun! As Doc Bloom’s assistant medical examiner, I’ve seen plenty of hangings in this town, particularly since the bottom fell out of Wall Street, but I never saw a guy snap his own neck before. They have to drop ’em twenty feet on a gallows to do that.”

He stood up and dusted off his hands. “Where’d you cut him down from? Hang himself in the elevator shaft?”

Doody told him where they’d found the body. “Hung himself out of the window, I guess.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, if he’d fallen from any window, he’d be bruised up worse than he is.” The Doctor signalled to his two stretcher-bearers. “Take it away,” he yelled.

They came in with a strip of canvas stretched between two poles. The rope was coiled neatly on the dead man’s chest, and they lifted their burden.

Just then an unforeseen interruption occurred.

A rasping voice, a voice that reeked with authority, came from behind them.

“Ixnay, you dopes, ixnay!”

A tall, gaunt man in a loose gray topcoat was pushing through the crowd. His lower lip protruded belligerently, and a dead cigar was clamped in one corner of his mouth.

“Put it down, you. You guys would have to go to night school for years before you’d get to be half-wits!”

The stretcher, gruesome burden and all, was dropped hurriedly to the floor again. A sheepish look came over the stretcher-bearers’ faces, and Officer Doody saluted.

“I didn’t know you were here, Inspector. It’s just another suicide, and I moved him in here so traffic could go on.”

“That’s too bad,” said Inspector Oscar Piper. He lit his cigar methodically. “Don’t you know that you ought to have a couple of plain-clothes men on a mixup like this before you can start carting the body

around?” He swung around the crowded lobby. “Where’s the patrolman on this beat?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Doody. “That’s why I was blowing my whistle.”

“You blew it so long that I had to leave a lady sitting over in Whyte’s restaurant and dash out to find what was coming off. I figured it was a Red parade at the least.” Inspector Piper shrugged his shoulders. “I guess it was a lot of fuss over nothing. It’s a hell of a note when the Homicide Squad can’t have a quiet cup of tea without picking up every two-for-a-dime suicide. Sorry I interrupted, Levin. You can cart the stiff off on my authority. Get him out of this mob, anyway. How’d he die?”

“Fracture of the first and second cervical vertebrae,” said Dr. Levin. “A very neat job of hanging, I’ll say. He’s been dead not more than half an hour. I’d say less. Body temperature is—” he took out a little thermometer from the dead man’s mouth—“just a little less than ninety-six.”

“Okay. Doody, who cut him down?”

Doody told what he knew. Inspector Piper frowned. “That doesn’t make sense, man. Well, never mind. Get back to your corner before all New York gets jammed bumper to headlight—hey, wait a minute. Did you find out who he is?”

Doody nodded. “His name is *Stait*, a fellow said. I didn’t look in the pockets.”

“A fellow said? What fellow?” Suddenly the Inspector was really interested.

Doody scratched his chin, and stared around the crowded lobby. The air went out of him like a pricked balloon.

“There was a fellow here, Inspector. But he must of left without waiting to give his name. A tall guy—with a little moustache!”

“Never mind, never mind. Get back on your corner. Blowing a whistle is just your speed, Doody.” Piper turned to the waiting morgue attendants. “Go ahead, take it away. I guess he must have jumped off the first floor window upstairs, though it’s funny nobody saw him commit suicide.” Doody took his departure with obvious relief.

“If this stiff was lying in the middle of the street, he couldn’t have jumped from a window,” pointed out Dr. Levin. “They don’t fall outwards, they fall straight down. Besides, he’s hardly bruised.”

“I guess I’ve seen enough hangings to know suicide when I run across it,” said Oscar Piper testily. He leaned over the body and felt at the inside coat pocket. It was empty of wallet or of anything else. Swiftly his hands went through the other pockets. A ring of keys, a wafer-thin watch set in a transparent case of pure crystal, a linen handkerchief with the initials in blue, “L S,” three crumpled one dollar bills and some silver. That was all.

“Now that’s funny,” observed the Inspector. He was thoughtful. “That’s damned funny. A guy who carries one of those five-hundred dollar watches usually packs a wallet and some dough, not to speak of calling cards and all that.”

“Still think it’s suicide, Oscar?”

The Inspector whirled around at the voice. Standing at his shoulder was a woman of perhaps thirty-nine or so, a woman possessed of a certain unusual determination of character if her chin and the bridge of her nose were to be taken as evidence. She was dressed in the fashion of some years ago if in any fashion at all, and she gripped a well-worn umbrella firmly in one hand. The crowd pushed back discreetly to let her through.

“Hildegarde Withers! I didn’t know you followed me!”

“You didn’t think I was going to sit there in Whyte’s and eat your cinnamon toast as well as my own, did you?” Her voice was pitched low, but it had an edge on it. “The last time you heard a police alarm and walked out on me you left me sitting in a taxi outside City Hall until the Marriage License bureau had closed. I’m not letting you get away from me again that way.”

“This is just a vulgar suicide,” explained the Inspector to his lady friend.

“Yes? Well, if there’s any excitement I’m going to get in on it.” Miss Withers’ nostrils widened a trifle, increasing the resemblance between her face and that of a particularly well-bred horse. Her keen eyes, behind the gold-rimmed glasses, twinkled delightedly. “Notice the coat, Oscar, notice the coat,” she whispered. “You may find out before we’re done that this is the place for the Homicide Squad after all. And perhaps the place for me, too.” The Inspector’s face was blank.

“I don’t get you!”

Miss Withers pointed silently to the cigarette which had burned itself quite thoroughly into the furry softness of the dead man’s coat lapel.

“Did you ever hear of a man’s committing suicide while smoking a cigarette? Not while he was hanging himself, anyway. Hemp and tobacco don’t go well together—although some people like to smoke cigars that are compounded that way.” She sniffed at Piper’s fuming perfecto.

The Inspector nodded slowly. “Maybe, just maybe, you’re right. Well, this is a mess. The Commissioner will raise hell because we didn’t leave the body in the middle of traffic until they’d taken photographs and fingerprinted the whole block and so forth. But there’s nothing for it now ...”

He stopped short. Officer Doody, who had made a beginning at sorting out his badly entangled corner, appeared suddenly beside him again. Someone was with him.

“Beg your pardon, sir.” Doody produced the cringing figure of the little cab-driver. “This is Al Leech, Inspector, Hackman’s Badge 4588. It was him I sent to ring in for an ambulance. Instead of doing that he phoned for the Morgue wagon. It was him that saw whatever it was that happened. I just nabbed him as he was trying to untangle his cab from the wreck down there with the car that didn’t have any driver.”

“Good work, Doody,” said the Inspector. He faced the little man.

“So you had a smash, huh? Did that have anything to do with this business up here? Where’s the other driver?”

“The other driver? There wasn’t any other driver!”

“You mean he beat it as soon as there was a crash? Or did he come running up here to rubberneck like the rest of these yawps?”

“Neither one,” insisted Leech. “I’m telling you there wasn’t any driver in that blue Chrysler. That blue open job was running wild when she bumped me—because the driver jumped out away up the street. About here, I’m thinking. That’s him there on the stretcher!”

“You’re drunk, man!”

“I haven’t had enough fares today to buy a glass of beer,” insisted the driver. “I tell you, I saw it all. It wasn’t so clear, on account of the darkness and the thick snow and all. But I saw him. He jumped out of the roadster, as if he was trying to grab the side of a bus that was sailing past I was way over to the left, trying to pass the car in front of me, which is the only reason I saw anything. I saw it all ...”

“Go on, man. You saw what all?”

“I saw the guy in the yellow coat. He gave a sort of leap, like a fish going after the bait or a scared frog coming out of a puddle. I saw him rise right up out of the seat, his arms flopping. His car came on towards me, and the headlights were burning dim. But he ... he ... you’ll say I’m lying ...”

“Go on!” Piper’s teeth were clamped into his dead cigar. “What else did you see?”

“As God is my Judge,” said Leech the hackman, “I saw him go up into the air, over the rumble seat and down to the street ... *backwards!*”

II

Corpus Delicti

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, PATROLMAN Dan Kehoe came striding along the slush of Forty-second Street, his nightstick twirling gaily and a broad smile on his face. He waved cheerfully at Doody through the rush of traffic, and then took advantage of a lull and came up beside the traffic officer.

"It's a great night for ducks," he observed, knocking the wet snow from his shoulders.

"Yeah," said Doody shortly.

"What are you so grumpy about? Sore because you have to stand here in the slush? You ought to get yourself transferred, Doody."

"Maybe I will," said the traffic officer shortly. "There ought to be a job open walking pavements on this beat tomorrow or the next day, if I can tell anything from the look on the Inspector's face when he was here a minute ago."

"Huh?" Kehoe looked up quickly. "What Inspector?"

Doody stopped the east-west traffic with a determined hand. "Piper, of the Homicide Squad. We been having a three ring circus here while you was wetting your whistle in a speak somewhere. A stiff laying in the street, with a rope around his neck, and everything else. Read about it in the papers. They just took him away to the Morgue, and if you don't believe me look up there and see if that's Helen Morgan leaning against the lamp post."

Kehoe looked, and saw a uniformed cop from his own precinct lounging idly on the sidewalk in front of me Enterprise Trust, guarding the scene of the disturbance.

"I'm a son of a gun," he remarked. "But say, I ain't been in no speak. Lookit this eye of mine."

Doody looked, and saw that the flatfoot had a gorgeous shiner around his left eye, of that deep, rich shade of bluish black which comes from the impact of hard knuckles.

"What did they do, throw you out of Mike's Place for digging into the bologna dish too heavy?"

“They did not,” Dan Kehoe looked hurt. “I was walking down Forty-fourth Street about three quarters of an hour ago and I see some rough-necks haul a cab-driver out from behind his wheel and sock him a couple of times in the nose.

“So I tear up and I start to pull ’em apart, and what does the biggest of the toughs do but whale away and take a sock at me. So I socks back, and the other one jumps me. I’m going for my gun when a third guy, a little guy, climbs out of the cab and knocks the feet out from under me. He yelled something about teaching me to interfere in a private argument between gentlemen.”

“As if he could teach you anything,” cut in Doody.

“Sure. Well, I was just getting my second wind when out of the hotel comes a big guy in a fancy vest He says his name is Carrigan and he’s the manager of the outfit, which happens to be a travelling Rodeo that’s over to the Garden this week. He explained that the boys ought to be forgiven on account of how they ain’t used to gyp cabs out in Wyoming where they hail from, and if I was to book any of the boys on disorderly conduct charges why the show would have to be called off, so I finally let him talk me into being soft-hearted. We all went into Mike’s and had a beer or two, and he gave me these, for tonight ...”

Kehoe pulled a sheaf of pink pasteboards from his service coat. “Box seats, too!”

“Leave me see!” Doody grabbed a couple. “Damned if they ain’t. Well, the Missis and me will enjoy these, thanks to ye. She likes the western movies and she ought to get a kick out of seeing real cowboys in action. By the looks of your eye, they got plenty action, too. You better ring in the station house and explain where you been while all the excitement was going on here, and then go and get your eye painted out.”

“Okay,” said Kehoe. “But first I’m going up and have a look at the spot where your boy friend jumped out of his car with a rope around his neck.”

“Find yourself a clue and solve the mystery,” suggested Doody, his voice heavy with sarcasm. “Find the dropped cuff link and you’ll get put on Piper’s squad of master-minds in the Homicide Squad.”

“Nerts,” said Dan Kehoe. He cut through traffic, avoiding the broken glass which still littered the northeast corner of the crossing, and sauntered

up to chat for a moment with the bored copper who had been assigned to watch over the “scene of the crime.”

Then Kehoe plodded on north through the snow toward the call-box. There was a broken fountain pen lying in the gutter, half hidden by the slushy snow, and only a few inches from where his heavy brogans passed. But Dan Kehoe wasn’t looking for clues.

If he had found that fountain pen, history would have been considerably different. But Dan Kehoe was busy thinking how to spend the yellow-backed twenty that Carrigan, manager of the Rodeo, had slipped him to make up for the black eye.

That fountain pen was to be discovered about theater time by a quick-witted young Jewish student, who knew that its makers in their Thirty-fourth Street shop replaced all broken parts instantly and without charge. He smashed the barrel, therefore, until the etched name was obliterated, and the next day he had it repaired from point to cap—with a new name on the barrel.

Morris Miltberg was to write an almost-perfect philosophy examination at CCNY with it in a few weeks, for which he was spending most of his evenings cramming at the present time. If he had only read the daily papers he might have recognized a name, and then the philosophy examination, and this story, might never have been written. But he didn’t.

At this moment Miss Withers and the Inspector were rolling across Fifty-seventh in a taxi.

“Well, suppose it does happen to be one of *the* Staits who was found dead in the street,” Miss Withers was saying. “Besides there having been a college athlete by that name a year or so ago, who are the Staits ? I thought you said no more murder cases for you unless it was somebody in the public eye?”

“You probably wouldn’t know about the Stait family,” explained the Inspector wearily. “Naturally the old name doesn’t mean anything out in Iowa where you come from. But here in New York ...”

“Never mind where I come from,” interrupted the school-teacher, testily. It had always been a great sorrow to Miss Withers that her father and mother had moved from the intellectual fastnesses of Beacon Street to Des Moines a few months before her advent into this world.

“Anyway,” continued the Inspector, “the Staits used to rate with the Vanderbilts and the Stuyvesants. The third mayor of New York was a Stait.

Tammany Hall was built on land donated by old Roscoe Stait the First. And now one of his grandsons is found dead in the middle of a crowded thoroughfare which his grandfather used for a cowpasture. The family hasn't the money it used to have, but there's a bit in the till yet, I'm thinking. Anyway, the newspapers are going to raise merry hell until we find out the inside of that circus of death that happened this afternoon. What's more, we're going to get *the* murderer, and get him quick."

Miss Withers smiled triumphantly. "Then you agree that it's murder and not suicide?"

"It's murder all right," insisted the Inspector. The cab slowed down for a red light at Seventy-second. "A nasty murder, too. Nothing to work from. No rhyme or reason to it. Here's a man found in the street with a rope around his neck. And an empty roadster. No place to search for finger prints. No doorman to question. No eye-witnesses, just because there were too many people there."

"I don't get that," said his companion. "On Fifth Avenue ... at the rush hour ..."

"Exactly. It was snowing hard, and everybody was looking to see where they walked, and nobody paid much attention to passing cars. The only eye-witness we've got gives us a cock and bull story about a man jumping backwards out of his car. And that's a physical impossibility."

"I wonder," murmured Miss Withers.

"The trouble with this case," said the Inspector, drumming his fingers impatiently against the window, "the trouble with this case is that it's too weird, too bizarre. My boys know just what to do when they find a round-heeled little chorus girl strangled in her apartment, or walk in on a missing judge dead in bed with the wife of his best friend. That's routine. All the same, even though there's nothing here but the rope to get our teeth into, it's the complicated murders that are solved easiest. If we found Walter Winchell with a bullet through his head we'd have to pick up a thousand suspects, but when we find somebody choked to death with butter we just look for a nut. See what I mean?"

The cab whirled around onto the Drive, and began to make better time. It was already dark, and the snow was falling so heavily that Miss Withers could hardly make out the lights of Jersey across the Hudson.

"We're almost there," Inspector Piper explained. "I want to be the one to break the news to that family, and see how they take it. I won't be but a

few minutes, you'd better wait in the cab."

Miss Withers got her dander up in a second. "Wait in the cab? Oscar Piper, you had me wait in a cab once, and I waited there for nearly two hours while you chased a poor little Chinaman across Brooklyn Bridge."

"Yeah? Well, that poor little Chinaman was packing opium enough to keep the snow-birds happy all winter. I explained it all, Hildegarde!"

"Never mind. But I'm coming in the Stait house with you. I can be your stenographer again, and take down questions and answers. I want to be in it if there's any excitement. And you do, too. You claim you're taking up this case personally because of the Stait name, but you're really doing it because it's a case that's different, and after the excitement we had on the Aquarium Murder (The Penguin Pool Murder, Brentano's, 1931) desk work bores you. Isn't that true?"

Inspector Piper nodded. "But there's no need for you to get mixed up in this."

"If you shut me out of this case," promised Miss Withers decisively, "I won't even keep my promise to be a *sister* to you, Oscar Piper."

In the first flush of excitement at the successful culmination of the Aquarium Murder, these two had decided to get married. A confirmed old bachelor and a determined old maid, they were both secretly relieved that an accidental alarm had prevented them from going through with it.

"All right, you can come along," said the Inspector grudgingly. "There's the house, you can see it from here. It's the big four-story graystone tomb on the corner—the one with the light on the top floor." He tapped on the window. "Pull up here, driver."

They walked slowly along the sidewalk toward the Stait mansion, the snow muffling their footsteps.

"This is an errand I dislike," confessed Piper. "It's not so easy, even if you've been in this business as long as I have, to walk into a happy home and say 'Excuse me, but I just sent your darling son to the Morgue, and I want you to go down with me and identify him.'"

"There isn't a chance that they've already got the news?"

The Inspector shook his head. "Not a chance. The papers won't come out with an extra tonight, anyway. The first sheet to have it will be the morning rags, which will be on the street in about two hours. No, we're first with the tidings, all right."

He pressed his gloved thumb against the button. From somewhere in the recesses of the house came the muffled peal of a bell.

There was a long delay, and then at last a shadow appeared on the door. It swung open, disclosing the well-rounded figure of a little maid who quite evidently had remained ignorant of the recent exodus of short skirts from the fashion pages. Her knees, the Inspector couldn't help noticing, were all that they should have been, beneath the insignificant little lace apron. There was a quantity of mussed blondish hair.

Miss Withers thought that the girl didn't look overly bright.

"Is Mr. Stait at home?"

The girl made a valiant effort to slam the door in their faces, but the Inspector's heavy brogan interposed just in time.

"You mean Mr. Lew Stait?" asked the maid, when she saw that these visitors were determined.

The Inspector hesitated. "I'm not sure who I want to see," he said. "It's about Mr. Lew." He showed his badge, cupped in the palm of his hand.

The vacant blue eyes widened, and then grew suddenly hard and brittle as turquoise, and much the same shade.

"I don't care who you are," she said defiantly. "I've instructions that Mr. Lew isn't at home to anybody!"

"All right, my girl. Now don't get hysterical, but I have some bad news and I have to break it to some member of the family."

"Tell me!" The girl's voice was rasping and hoarse. "What about Mr. Lew? You've got to tell me!" She had forgotten for a moment that she was a maid.

"Be a good calm girl and don't scream," said Inspector Piper smoothly. "Mr. Lew Stait won't be home at all. You see, he was murdered about an hour ago."

There was a moment's silence. Miss Withers thought to herself that it was just like a man to break it that way.

The girl screamed. But they were screams of laughter. She flung the door wide open, and pointed her finger at the figure of a young man who sat on the davenport in the first floor living room, clearly visible through the dingy portieres. He was a tall young man in a dark blue suit, a very handsome young man. Miss Withers noticed that he was reading a magazine upside-down, and had just finished combing his hair.

His soft collar was open, which struck Miss Withers with a ghastly significance. For on the last occasion when she had seen that fair-haired young man, he had worn the red stigma of a noose around his throat!

“That’s him right there! That’s Mister Lew!” proclaimed the girl in ringing soprano tones. “I ask you, does he look like a dead one?”

Her position forgotten, the girl stood with her back against the wall, her head turned toward the young man. He had risen from his chair and was coming, with an expression of polite distaste, toward the hall. He stopped in the doorway.

“I am Lewis Stait,” he said calmly. “Is there something I can do for you?”

Piper’s teeth met in his cigar with a dull click.

Miss Withers advanced a step. “Inspector, hadn’t you better tell the young man that the newspapers are already printing his obituary?”

III

The Gray Goose

YOU'D BETTER COME IN," said Lew Stait. "Gretchen, that will do. If I need you, I'll ring." His voice held no touch of softness or romance.

This young man was pale, but otherwise seemed to be in pretty good control. With a flounce of her diminutive skirt, the little maid turned her back on him and started down the hall toward the servants' quarters.

"Don't leave the house," warned Inspector Piper. "I'll want to ask you some questions in a little while."

Then he went into the living room after their host, and Miss Withers followed. It was a high, long room, with an obsolete gas chandelier in the center of the ceiling and old-fashioned hot air registers in the floor. Bookcases ran around the walls, containing musty volumes which looked as if they had never been opened. The chair in which Miss Withers seated herself, like everything else in the room, was dark and heavy and old ... and vaguely uncomfortable.

The Inspector introduced himself, and pointed out Miss Withers as his assistant.

Lew Stait nodded. "About my obituary ...?"

The Inspector was still staring at the smooth, unmarked throat of the young man who faced them. The words brought him up with a jerk.

"There seems to be some mistake here," he said slowly. "There was an accident about an hour ago on Fifth Avenue. The body of a young man in a camel's-hair overcoat was found not far from a wrecked Chrysler roadster, and identified as that of a Lew Stait. We traced the auto registration and got this address. All I have to say is this, that your double, the closest double I've ever seen, lies down in the autopsy room of the City Morgue at this moment."

Their host lost his aplomb for a second, and his eyes widened. Then by an obvious effort he regained his *savoir faire*. "Not my double, Inspector. It must be—it's my twin brother Laurie!"

"Your twin?"

The boy nodded, his face white as death. “We’re what they call *identical twins*. It only happens once in a thousand cases of twins that both are exactly the same in physical characteristics, I’ve heard. So it isn’t strange that whoever saw Laurie’s—Laurie’s body after the auto wreck might mistake it for mine. You see, he was driving my car, and he’d slipped into my camel’s-hair coat because of the storm. And now, you say he’s ... he’s dead?”

“He’s dead,” agreed the Inspector. “But not in an auto crash. He was strangled. We don’t just know how, but it looks like murder.”

The boy was gripping the edge of his chair, but somehow Miss Withers felt that he wasn’t really as surprised as he tried to be. Perhaps it was because of the countless inhibitions of his inbred, overcivilized stock, but he was too deeply entrenched behind his barriers to seem genuinely shocked.

“*Murder!*” He repeated the word several times, tasting it.

The Inspector nodded. “In a few minutes I want you to go down to the Morgue with me or one of my men, and formally identify the body of your brother. But first, I must ask you some questions, just as a matter of routine.”

“But who did it? What happened? I don’t understand!”

“You don’t need to. Just answer these questions. First, when did you last see your brother Laurie alive?”

The boy swallowed, and considered for a moment “It was about tea-time this afternoon, I should say. Perhaps four-thirty, perhaps a little before. It was right here in this room. He came to get the key to my roadster. The car, you see, is mine, but we both used it a good deal. And now he won’t ever use it again!”

“Do you know where he was driving? Any idea of why he wanted the use of the car?”

Lew Stait shook his head. “No—no, I don’t know. Why should I know? He used it whenever he wanted it. He considered he had a right to, because there was only the one car. Gran gave it to me, but actually it was as much his as mine.”

Miss Withers was jotting all this down in her little notebook, a fact that seemed to make Lew Stait vaguely uncomfortable.

“Would you mind telling me just who are the members of this household?”

“Not at all. First, there’s Gran. My grandmother, you know. Mrs. Roscoe Stait. Gran is well over ninety, and she hardly ever comes downstairs. The attic has been done over for her. But all the same, she’s the commanding officer in this family, and don’t you forget it. You can order the rest of us around, but your badge won’t mean a thing to Gran.”

“Yes? And then, besides Gran?”

“Well, there’s Aunt Abbie. She’s a younger sister of my mother ... my mother and father, you see, are dead. Aunt Abbie isn’t a Stait, but she’s been sort of in charge of our bringing up since father and mother went down on the Titanic. She—”

“Never mind. The rest of them?”

“Well, that’s the list on the distaff side, barring the servants. You saw Gretchen, and the cook is Mrs. Hoff. She’s been here forever, I guess. Then there’s cousin Hubert. He’s a Stait, but more or less indirectly. He’s really a second-cousin, but he’s an orphan, too, so this has been his home since he was a baby. He’s the brains of the house, and Laurie and I have always been the brawn. Football and all that, you know, while Hubert was making Phi Beta Kappa. Of course we all went to Columbia. Gran wouldn’t have us out of her sight.”

“That’s all?”

“All but the colored boy who comes in to tend the furnace and clip the grass in summer. He makes himself useful around the kitchen when there are guests, which is very seldom now.”

“Good. Now can you get them all into one room for me? I’d like to question everybody for a few minutes, including the servants.” The Inspector was warming up.

But Lew Stait shook his head. “I can’t get them all into one room. Gran wouldn’t come downstairs to please anybody. It’s Mrs. Hoff’s night out, and she won’t be back for hours. And Aunt Abbie and Hubert are at a movie. Aunt Abbie gets a great thrill out of the cinema. She loves to lose herself in a thriller, and she’d sit through an earthquake if she was seeing a love scene. She doesn’t like to go alone, so we take turns in playing escort. She’s been mighty good to us, and it’s the least we can do for her.”

“At a movie, huh? Happen to know which one?”

Lew Stait nodded. “It’s the Cinemat, the modernistic theater on Fifty-seventh. I know, because I heard Hubert say when he left here with Laurie that he was going to meet Aunt Abbie in the lobby. She’s been shopping

today. Hubert was going to take her to the movie and then to dinner, on account of this being the cook's night out."

The Inspector was puzzled. "You say that your cousin Hubert left here with Laurie?"

"Yes. Laurie was going to drop him off at the theater on his way down."

Piper nodded. "Fifty-seventh would lie on the direct route between here and where the accident happened. Hildegard, will you get that theater on the phone and have those people paged, or an announcement made from the stage or something?"

Miss Withers looked at her watch. "It isn't necessary," she pointed out. "It's eight o'clock now, and those movies never run longer than two hours at the most. Even allowing an hour for dinner, they'll be here shortly if they come right home."

Piper nodded. "One thing more. Young man, I suppose you can account for your own time during the last three hours?" He lit his cigar, and eyed the surviving twin through the curls of smoke.

"I can account for it all right," said Lew Stait sullenly. "I was right here in this house. Gretchen will bear witness to that. She made some sandwiches for me, and took up Gran's toast and tea as usual. Why, do you insinuate that I'd have a hand in whatever you think happened to Laurie? My own twin? God, man, it would be like suicide to lay a hand on him. He was ... he was like *myself*!"

His acting is improving, thought Miss Withers. Or else he wasn't acting. She didn't sense the insincerity in his feeling now.

Instead of the Inspector's own gruff, professional tones, her own voice took up the questioning. "Young man, who do you think it was that killed your brother Laurie?"

He looked up, startled. "How should I know?"

"Twins are generally supposed to be closer together than other people, even than brothers and sisters, aren't they? Murder always casts its shadow ahead. Didn't you notice anything in your brother Laurie's actions these past few days?"

He hesitated for a long second. "No—no, of course not. Nothing definite, I mean. Except that Laurie has been sort of worried, upset a little, during the last month or so. Particularly since Monday."

“This is Friday.” Miss Withers pressed the point, “How do you mean that he acted ‘upset’?”

Lew Stait took up a cigarette, and instead of lighting it, he carefully broke it into halves, and then quarters, and then eighths. “Well, just little things, you know. We’ve always shared a room here, you see. We’ve been together ever since we were boys. The first time we were ever separated longer than a weekend was this summer, when Laurie went out to a dude ranch in Wyoming, and I stayed here in town.”

“Why didn’t you go?”

“I had a job. Have it yet. In the Brunnix Agency, advertising. I’ll have to quit it now, though, because Gran will want me around home after what’s happened. Anyway, since Laurie got back from that ranch near Medicine Hat he’s been acting strangely. He got letters from a girl out there, for one thing.”

Miss Withers had stepped out of character for a supposed police-stenographer. “You said he seemed worried. What did he do?”

Lew Stait was staring at the open fire, his eyes cloudy. “It was the worst when Laurie was alone,” admitted the young man. “He used to sit there in that big dark room upstairs for hours and hours, chewing away at the mouthpiece of his pipe, and staring at the brick walls across the alley until I thought he was going crazy or something.”

A question was on the tip of Miss Withers’s tongue, but she didn’t ask it. For just at that moment the lights of a taxi-cab flashed against the window, and then came to a standstill along the curb. The tension in the room was broken.

“There’s Aunt Abbie and Hubert now,” said Lew Stait. His voice was steadier, and it was clear that he welcomed the relief.

He moved toward the hall, but the Inspector raised his hand. “Wait a minute. I’ll answer the door. Miss Withers, will you use that phone in the hall under the stairs to get in touch with Headquarters and have Sergeant Taylor and a couple of the boys come up here on the double? Stait, I wish you’d get your hat and wait until I call you. Just a matter of routine, you know, this identification stuff.”

Hesitatingly, Lew Stait moved toward the stair. “Mind, you’re not to talk to anybody about this, now or later,” instructed the Inspector. Then he went swiftly toward the foyer door, in which a key was already being

inserted. Evidently members of the Stait family did not put much trust in Gretchen's promptness, but used their own latchkeys.

Miss Withers stood alone in the center of the big living room for a moment, and revolved a few fundamental facts in her mind. Nothing definite, and yet—

Then she remembered that she was supposed to be on the telephone now. She went toward the instrument slowly enough to catch a glimpse of two new faces at the other end of the hall—the round, cherubic visage of a plump young man in glasses and a sloppy fedora, and behind him the placid, vacuous stare of a woman of Miss Withers' own age, but painted and powdered and bedecked with a Eugenie hat and three long feathers.

Cousin Hubert and Aunt Abbie ... "Give her another feather, Lord, and let her take wing," whispered Miss Withers, remembering the anecdote.

Inspector Piper was already introducing himself. He always put a good deal of faith in the effect of bad tidings, Miss Withers knew. He loved to blurt out the news and then watch out for changes of expression on the faces of his audience.

"Spring 7-3100," said Miss Withers into the mouthpiece. As she waited for the operator to complete the call, she found herself absent-mindedly humming an old tune—a tune vaguely reminiscent of something that she had sung Sunday after Sunday in the third pew on the left in St. Luke's Episcopal Church back in Des Moines ...

No, that wasn't it, either. It wasn't a hymn tune. It was something that Hildegard Withers had learned at, or rather on, the knee of her own grandmother. The school-teacher shivered a little as she realized its weird significance now. For the words to the senseless thing began "Go tell Aunt Abbie, go tell Aunt Abbie ... Go tell Aunt Abbie that her gray goose is dead ..."

Aunt Abbie's voice rose, very much like the cry of that same gray goose, from the living room. She had got the news.

IV

Miss Withers Freezes

MISS WITHERS WAS ABOUT to leave the phone and return to the living room when suddenly she drew back into the shadows under the stairway.

Someone was coming down the stairs, someone who quite evidently did not wish to make any noise. The muffled tread was cautious and light, as if whoever was descending those steps was prepared to turn and run at the sound of a dropped pin.

But Miss Withers wasn't dropping any pins these days. She had dropped a pin on a stairway once, and a man was sitting in the Death House at Ossining for the strange use he had put it to—in the pool of the black penguins.

There was only one light in the long hall, and that was up in the front toward the little vestibule. It was years ago that Miss Withers had learned to be silent and invisible. She might have been standing in the doorway of her third grade classroom during a furious spit-ball battle, or looming up over the shoulder of a hapless youth who preferred a lurid copy of *Weird Tales* to the more prosaic reading of his Geography, and had got the happy idea of enclosing the former within the covers of the latter. Naturalists call it "the ability to freeze"—and a just-hatched partridge chick can do it perfectly. Miss Withers froze now, shrinking back into the extreme corner. She was there and yet she was not there. A spider might have used her shoulder for one corner of his web, and a mouse might have run across her shoes without fright—at least, on the part of the mouse.

And as she waited there, hardly drawing breath into her lungs, Miss Withers saw the figure of a man pass quickly past her, back toward the domain of the servants. A door closed upon him—but not too soon for Miss Withers to make sure who this man was. It was Lew Stait, in his hat and overcoat, and he had a dark and indistinguishable oblong in his hand!

She went on, into the living room. "Aunt Abbie" was seated on a chaise longue, having a mild case of the vapours. Closer scrutiny confirmed Miss Withers' first impression of the lady. She was as empty of ideas as a

drum. Her dress was a little on the tea-gown order, and a worn sealskin cape lay beside her. She was sniffing into her handkerchief about “poor dear Laurie.” She shook her head sadly. “And to think how we all treated him, too!”

Behind her, “cousin Hubert” peered through his thick lenses like a startled owl. Inspector Piper, who had learned to identify people by their clothes and bearing, put Hubert Stait down as a nondescript poor-relation. Miss Withers was sorry for him, and later events justified her feeling.

The Inspector was quizzing Hubert. “You say that you rode down as far as the Cinemat Theater with your cousin Laurie?”

“I did.” Hubert chose his words carefully. “He dropped me off there because I had an appointment to take Aunt Abbie to see the new German musical film ‘Zwei Herzen im Deudelsac Takt.’ ...”

“What time did you see Laurie last?”

Hubert looked at his watch. “I met Aunt Abbie outside the theater at five. You see, we always go to the films at that hour because the matinee prices are still in effect, and we dine late anyway. I must have left Laurie a minute or two before five ...”

“I see.” The Inspector nodded. “That is very important. I was anxious to find if Laurie had time to pick anyone else up, or to visit anyone, before the time he met his end, which was at five-thirty or a few seconds before. But with traffic as it is at that hour, he must have kept on a straight course to have reached Forty-second Street in half an hour. Young man, do you realize that you must have been the last person, except of course the murderer, to see Laurie Stait alive?”

Hubert nodded. “Perhaps you’re right, officer—I beg your pardon, *Inspector*. He seemed in high spirits as he left us, however. He didn’t seem to have any warning of what was waiting for him, when he waved good-bye to Aunt Abbie and me.”

“We none of us do,” said the Inspector grimly. “So you went in to the moving picture show with your Aunt?”

Hubert nodded. “It’s a pretty good picture, Inspector. The Germans understand the nuances of production so much better than our Hollywood technicians, don’t you think?”

“I like Clara Bow,” said Piper gruffly.

“Well, in this picture there’s a bourgeois girl who falls in love with a musician.”

“Never mind, never mind. I don’t want a rehash of the plot I believe you were there, all right.”

“If you don’t, here’s our ticket stubs,” said Hubert with a faint grin. He offered two bits of red cardboard. Each bore a serial number and the monogram of the theater in big block letters. The Inspector put them in his vest pocket.

He turned to Aunt Abbie. “Did you like the movie?”

“Oh, yes, Inspector. But to think we were sitting there, laughing and enjoying ourselves, when poor Laurie was being killed in the street!”

“I notice that Hubert here is near-sighted,” observed the Inspector casually. Almost too casually, in fact. “I suppose he has to sit down in front while you, like most older persons, prefer to sit in the back rows?”

Aunt Abbie shook her head. “No, we usually sit in the middle rows, just as we did tonight. I hate to sit alone in a theater, even though I do get pretty engrossed in the story. A girl never knows who may come and sit beside her and ... you understand ...”

The Inspector nodded. “And after the show?”

“After the show we had dinner at a little restaurant near the theater, and then we came home. And it’s a good thing we did, let me tell you. I don’t know exactly how Gran is going to stand the shock. Of course, it’s not as if it was Lew—her favorite, you know. But Gran is so old that there’s no telling what she’ll do or how she’ll take on, and she’s used to my taking care of her, you know. I’d better run up and see.” Aunt Abbie gathered herself together.

“She doesn’t know yet,” the Inspector admitted. “There’ll be time enough, before this night is over. If she’s likely to take it hard, you’d better get a trained nurse over here.”

“Trained nurse?” Hubert was almost laughing. “You don’t know Gran. She’d throw a trained nurse out of the window, would Gran. She’s a despot, and not so benevolent a one, either. I’d hate to cross her. And she hasn’t let even the maid into her bedroom in years and years. If you got a trained nurse without her consent, or did anything else against her orders, Gran would be perfectly capable of cutting your throat. She’s so old she doesn’t care what happens.”

“Yeah? I’m looking forward to meeting this old lady.” Piper dropped his air of cross-examination. “This will be all for tonight. You can go to your rooms, but I’ll want to ask some more questions of both of you any

time. Remember, no discussing this between yourselves. I don't suppose either of you has any idea of who might have had reason to strangle Laurie Stait?"

"It was just what I'd have expected of him," Aunt Abbie declared. "Laurie was always getting into scrapes. He wasn't a bit like Lew, except in looks. That's why they always called him 'the bad twin' and Lew 'the good twin.' You know, doctors claim that twins have only enough moral stamina for one person, and usually it's all on one side."

Aunt Abbie paused for breath. "All the same, I can't think who could have done it. It would have been more like Laurie to have committed suicide."

"Why couldn't it have been suicide?" Cousin Hubert took the floor. "You said that Laurie was found in the street with a rope around his neck, and that the car he'd been driving was empty and wrecked a little distance ahead. Couldn't he have tied the rope to something inside the car, and slipped the noose around his own neck—then jumped overboard and let his car go on and hang him?"

Miss Withers objected. "What about the rope? It wasn't tied to the car when they found it. It was hanging loose."

"It could have pulled loose with the shock if it wasn't tied tight," the Inspector suggested, musingly. "We'll see what the medical examiner says in his report tomorrow."

He stopped, watching Miss Withers, who was sniffing. "Something burning in the kitchen," she observed.

"But what could be burning? It's cook's night out, and nobody ate in except Gran with her toast and tea a while ago, and whatever cold snack Gretchen was willing to dish up for Lew," Aunt Abbie cut in.

"Maybe it isn't from the kitchen," Miss Withers conceded. "Probably the drains in these old houses aren't what they should be."

The sound of an auto horn came from outside, again and again. "That must be Taylor and the boys," said the Inspector. "Miss Withers, will you wait here while I arrange to have Lew Stait taken down to the Morgue to identify his twin? I don't understand why, if that is the Sergeant outside, he doesn't come on in ..."

Suddenly Aunt Abbie clapped her hands. "I remember! The terrible, terrible news you told me when I came in made me forget. That's our cabman out there. Poor dear Hubert never has any money because he

spends his allowance for books, and I spent more than I meant to spend shopping. I told the man to wait while I got some money.”

She moved toward the hall. ‘I’ll run upstairs and get some change.’”

She almost ran into Lew Stait, who was waiting with hat and coat on, to make the trip down to the Morgue. “How lucky,” cried Aunt Abbie. “You’ve saved me a climb upstairs, Lew. I need a dollar, perhaps two, for my cabman. Have you got it to spare?”

“Of course, Auntie.” Lew’s hand went to his inside coat pocket, fumbled a moment, and then dropped to his hip.

While the four of them watched, he went through his pockets one by one. “Of all the things to happen!” he said in a dazed whisper.

“My pocket’s been picked!”

“Maybe you left it up in your room?” Aunt Abbie was comforting.

“No, I had it this afternoon. There wasn’t but fifteen or twenty dollars in it. That’s funny.”

He looked thoughtful. “Maybe I lost it somewhere—though I haven’t been out all afternoon. I distinctly remember having it at noon, though. I wonder”

Lew stopped short. “I wonder if Laurie could have needed some money and picked the wallet up off my dresser? We often borrowed back and forth, you know. At least, Laurie did.”

“I don’t like to speak ill of the dead,” said Aunt Abbie. “But Laurie Stait was untrustworthy about money, and there’s no use hiding it. Oh, he *wasn’t* dishonest. But he was always running short, and always borrowing and forgetting to return it ...”

“So there was only fifteen or twenty dollars in the wallet? Well, if Laurie did borrow it, that might establish a motive for murder, though a slim one. Because his wallet was missing when his body was found.” Inspector Piper made the announcement boldly, and it seemed to stagger Lew Stait.

“You mean that my brother might have been killed for what money was in that wallet?”

Piper nodded. “You see, nobody need have known how much or how little was in the billfold. And he looked as if he had money, you know. Only the means used in this murder don’t make sense with a robbery angle.” He scratched his head—and down the street the wail of a police siren rose as the cab-driver honked his signal again imploringly.

The Inspector took two dollars from his own billfold. "I'll take care of your cab, ma'am," he promised Aunt Abbie. "You can pay me tomorrow. I've got some friends of mine outside. Wait here, the rest of you, while I arrange for Mr. Lew Stait to take a little trip in a squad car."

He beckoned to the surviving twin. "You might as well get it over with," he said kindly. "You're the nearest male relative."

Lew Stait followed the Inspector out of the door, and a moment later Miss Withers heard the rising wail of the siren again, bearing Stait and one of the plainclothes men down to the gray building with the marble mattresses.

She herded Aunt Abbie and Hubert up the stairs, warning them that the Inspector would not want them to carry the news to the old lady on the top floor.

It was about ten minutes before Inspector Piper reappeared. Sergeant Taylor was with him, and behind the wiry little sergeant loomed the bulk of McTeague, the biggest and the dumbest-appearing detective on the force. He had dull, lifeless blue eyes that blinked often. Every blink printed a clear photograph on the sensitized paper that was the memory of McTeague.

Miss Withers nodded to the two newcomers, who separated—one to each entrance of the house. Then she drew Piper aside. "What about some dinner, Oscar? All you've had since lunch is tea and cinnamon toast, and you must be starved." She showed him her little address book, its pages filled with curly-queues. "I'm running out of paper."

"Never mind dinner," said Inspector Piper. She sensed that something had happened. "And never mind your shorthand notes, either. Look what McTeague just discovered, outdoors. The snow's stopped, and there's not a breath of wind. He saw something on the snow beside the sidewalk that looked like a drop or two of blood. But it wasn't blood. And we scouted around until we found all of it."

The Inspector showed Miss Withers four or five bits of red pasteboard that he had wrapped carefully between the pages of an old letter in his pocket. The pieces fitted together.

They bore a serial number, and the monogram of a theater. Miss Withers had seen that monogram before.

"Exhibit B," said the Inspector. He took from his vest pocket the two ticket stubs that Cousin Hubert had handed over to him.

They matched perfectly, all three of them. Except that Hubert's stubs bore the serial numbers R44557 and R44558,—while the torn fragments when pieced together read R4460I.

“And this means ...?”

“It means that someone in this house went to that movie this afternoon—someone who wanted to make sure that Hubert and Aunt Abbie were there, I'll bet. Someone who threw the stub away at the last minute, realizing that it might be dangerous to him—or herself—and trusted to the snowfall to cover it.”

Miss Withers shook her head slowly. “But I don't see what it means!”

“When you do see what it means,” grinned Inspector Piper, “this case will be all washed up!”

“Right now it could stand a lot of washing,” agreed Miss Withers.

V

Bull in the China Shop

THE ROUTINE INVESTIGATION WENT on, a little more swiftly now. Gretchen, the pert little blonde maid, was brought into the living room again. Her hair was combed, and she had put on a fresh apron and an air of defiance which wilted a little at the sight of Piper's best third-degree glare.

"Your name?"

"Gretchen Gilbert, sir ..."

"*Born* Gilbert?" Inspector Piper was lighting a fresh cigar.

"Yes, sir. No, sir. The name used to be Gilbrecht."

"How long have you had your job here?"

"It will be two years next September ... no, August." Gretchen was sitting on the very edge of the sofa, her ridiculously naked-looking legs crossed at the slim ankles.

"Like your job?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"What are your duties, exactly?"

"Well, sir, I take care of the upstairs, all but old Mrs. Stait's rooms, you know. She won't let anybody in there. And I wait on the table at meals and answer the door and make myself generally useful."

"Generally useful to Mr. Lew now and then, also?" The Inspector's voice was dry and quizzical, although Miss Withers looked up from her notebook with a start, and Sergeant Taylor choked a guffaw.

Gretchen never batted an eye. "You mean this afternoon? Well, a girl has to get ahead, Mister Policeman. I wouldn't expect you to understand. You've never been an upstairs maid."

"Never," admitted the Inspector. "Would you mind telling us just what your movements were this afternoon?"

Gretchen batted both eyes this time. "Huh?"

"The Inspector means, what did you do this afternoon?" Miss Withers helped out.

“Oh. Well, I helped Mrs. Hoff with the luncheon dishes because it was her afternoon off and she was anxious to get away. Then I got the linen ready for the laundry, which we do every Friday. It takes about an hour or so, I guess. About three o’clock Mr. Lew came home, and half an hour later Mr. Laurie and Mr. Hubert. Mr. Lew leaves his office early quite often, because business is so slow, he says.”

“And then?”

“Then I took Mrs. Stait her tea as usual, and shortly after that Mr. Lew rang from the living room and said that he didn’t want to go out for dinner because of the snow and would I get him a cold snack in the kitchen, which I did. I brought him some sandwiches in this room here, in front of the fireplace.”

“And the time?”

“It must have been about six o’clock, or a little before.”

“And you are able to swear that Mr. Lew wasn’t out of the house between three, when he came home from the office, and six when you took him some sandwiches?”

“Why—” she hesitated. “Why, yes, sir. I mean, I don’t think he went out. I didn’t see him go.”

“Very good. When did you see Mr. Laurie last?”

“Why, this afternoon, about four-thirty. He and Mr. Lew and Mr. Hubert were in the living room here having a drink. Mr. Hubert told me in the hall that he wouldn’t be home to dinner because he was riding with Mr. Laurie to the movie. Mr. Lew stayed in the living room, reading.”

Inspector Piper nodded slowly. “Tell me, Gretchen. Were there any telephone calls here today?”

“Oh, yes sir, lots. The florist called about his bill, and a lady called about some contribution to the Hundred Neediest Cases, and—”

“No, never mind that. I mean, any telephone calls that were out of the ordinary!”

Gretchen was thoughtful. “No, sir. I don’t think so.”

“Nothing at all? No calls from anyone you didn’t know?”

“Oh, yes. That man called again.”

Miss Withers sat up straight in her chair, and the Inspector’s voice bore an edge. “What man?”

“Why, the man who’s always calling Mr. Laurie. The man who’s called every day this week. You said out of the ordinary, but that’s got to be the

ordinary thing in this house. It's a man with a sort of southern accent."

"What did he say? Come on, tell us."

"Why, he asked for Mr. Laurie. You see, Mr. Laurie gave instructions last Monday that he was always out no matter who phoned or called. So I gave the message."

"What did the man *say*?"

"He said—" She was thoughtful. "He said: 'Tell that so-and-so of a tenderfoot that I'm going to have a talk with him right soon, OR ELSE!' He yelled the last two words, and then hung up like to deafen me the way he banged the receiver."

"Ah ha! Now we're getting some place!" The Inspector looked at Miss Withers triumphantly.

"You don't know this man's name?" Gretchen admitted that she didn't. She also admitted that she only answered the phone if she happened to be near it.

"Very good. Now, Gretchen, I want you to give me some information about this house. This is official, you understand, and you'll find it to your best interests to be frank with us."

Gretchen was nervous and willing. "Yes, sir."

"Tell me, frankly. Were any of the members of this household enemies? I mean, was there ever any strife, any unpleasantness?"

Gretchen's eyes widened again. "Oh, no, sir. Mrs. Stait is a little—well, a little peculiar, sir. But she's all right when she has her own way and she always has her own way. There was never any unpleasantness, sir."

"Did the twins, Mr. Lew and Mr. Laurie, get along perfectly?"

"Oh, yes, sir. They were very close, sir. It's only natural, seeing they were as like as two peas in a pod, sir. In looks, that is."

"Excuse me for interrupting," cut in Miss Withers. "But how did you manage to tell them apart? They wore each other's clothes, they shared a room. It must have been difficult."

Gretchen smiled, dreamily. "Oh, not for me, ma'am. Mr. Lew, he's always bright and cheerful and full of energy, with, a kind word for anybody. They looked alike, but that was as far as it went. Mr. Laurie, he was always sort of standoffish and quiet—a regular hermit sort. That's why he wasn't popular, ma'am. I'll admit that when I first came here it gave me a start sometimes to see one of the twins here and then the other one come in from somewhere all of a sudden, but I soon got used to it. And even at

first, I found out a sure way. If it was Mr. Laurie, he'd pass by without a word, but if it was Mr. Lew, he'd pinch my cheek or rumple my hair."

Gretchen was blushing a little around the neck and ears, and Miss Withers nodded sagely. "I see."

"Mr. Lew is always singing or humming or whistling, and Mr. Laurie was always gloomy. He liked to be by himself."

"Thank you, Gretchen. And Mr. Hubert?" The Inspector took up the round again. "How did Mr. Hubert get along with Mr. Lew and Mr. Laurie?"

"Just perfect, sir. Oh, they were just like big brothers to Mr. Hubert. Cook tells me that in all the five years that Mr. Hubert's lived here in this house, she's never seen anything sweeter than the way the twins took to their cousin from the first. He's never been very strong, you know. He's always been a little queer. But they saw to it that he got out and played games instead of reading all the time. Why, it was Mr. Lew who practically made Mr. Hubert take boxing lessons so they could all spar together in the basement. And when they were seniors at the University here, and Mr. Hubert was a sophomore, they made him go and play football. Why, they wouldn't take no for an answer, and it did him worlds of good, cook says."

"I see. Then the three boys seemed to enjoy one another's company?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Why, Mr. Laurie and Mr. Lew wouldn't think of going anywhere without taking Mr. Hubert along. They were so much alike they got tired of each other, I guess, and wanted a third. Why, they bought Mr. Hubert a full dress suit out of their own allowances when Gran—I mean Mrs. Stait—said that his dinner jacket was good enough with times as bad as they are. Though if I do say it as shouldn't, he looked a sight in those long tails, with his skinny neck and his legs that don't meet at the knees by half an inch." She giggled, wickedly.

"That will do, Gretchen. You can go to your room, and as soon as Mrs. Hoff comes in, tell her that I want to talk to her here."

"Yes, sir." Gretchen made a willing exit from the scene of the inquisition.

Inspector Piper shook his head after her. "There goes a tough little mug if I ever saw one," he observed.

Miss Withers shook her head. "Nonsense, Oscar. Didn't you ever hear of the flapper? Well, Gretchen's just learned about flapperdom. In five years she'll have a husband and a flat full of Grand Rapids furniture by the

month, and a couple of hostages to fortune into the bargain. You're old fashioned, Oscar."

"I'm surprised at you," Piper told her. "Well, let's get back to business. There's only the old lady and the cook left for us to quiz. Got your notebook full?"

"When I have, I'll throw it away and write the shorthand on my cuff," said Miss Withers acidly. "You aren't getting anywhere, Inspector. You aren't even 'getting to foul ball,' as the boys say ..."

"You probably mean 'first base,'" put in the Inspector mildly. "But I don't see why I'm not getting anywhere. This is all part of the routine."

"Routine fiddlesticks," said the school-teacher. "Why don't you find out where Laurie Stait was bound for when he borrowed his brother's car and started down Fifth Avenue? Why don't you find out that?"

"But—"

"Somebody knew," she reminded him tartly.

"Maybe the old lady will tell us," suggested Piper thoughtfully. "I sort of look forward to the chat with her. She sounds like something out of Godey's Book. Here goes—"

The telephone in the hall broke into a shrill crescendo. Sergeant Taylor moved swiftly from the front door to answer it, but the Inspector halted him.

"You go, Miss Withers," he said softly. "It would seem more natural for a woman's voice to answer at this house than a man's. We might just possibly learn something."

She went. For a moment she held the receiver against her ear. Then she said hello in a low voice.

"Is Mr. Lew Stait there?"

It was a girl's voice, a deep, warm mezzo-soprano. There was a thin note of worry somewhere, buried deep.

Miss Withers knew what she was supposed to say. "Who is calling, please?"

"Oh, is that you, Aunt Abbie? This is Dana. Is Lew there—or Laurie?"

"They're out just now—is there any message?" Miss Withers hated to tell the lie, even though it was regular procedure in such cases.

"Oh ... I see." The voice was disappointed.

"Shall I have him call you back when he comes in? Where are you now?"

The girl at the other end of the wire wasn't suspicious. "Where should I be? Here at home, at the apartment, of course ... where I've been waiting for Lew hours and hours ... has anything happened?"

"You say you're at the apartment *where?*" Miss Withers made a good cast, but the trout didn't rise to the fly. There was a long silence, and then the receiver clicked softly at the other end of the line.

Miss Withers left the phone and rejoined the Inspector. She told him what had happened.

"A dame with a soft, sweet voice asking for Mr. Lew, huh?" The Inspector permitted himself the luxury of a fresh, unchewed cigar and a smile. "Strike up the chamber music, boys. Hearts and Flowers from now on in this case, we've found our love interest. I was hoping that we could do better than Gretchen." He cast a glance at the school-teacher. "Just like the Aquarium Murder, Hildegard. Still looking for the happy ending?"

"I'm off romance for the present," Miss Withers told him stiffly. "I suppose you're all full of ideas about how to track down the poor child who just talked to me, yes? It's comparatively simple, of course."

"Yeah?" The Inspector stopped dead in his tracks and looked at her. "How is it so easy? It'll be no cinch to trace that call—most of the phones are on the dial system now anyway, and there's not a chance to trace a call from one of those jiggers."

Miss Withers shook her head. "You don't need to trace that call. That girl who called herself Dana hung up when she realized I was a fraud as Aunt Abbie—and she knew I was a fraud because I asked where her apartment was. Which means that Aunt Abbie, and probably the rest of the household here, know her pretty well and where she lives."

"Right. I'll put the screws to Aunt Abbie." He went toward the hall. "Taylor, hop up those stairs and get me the dame who was down here a minute ago. Hurry up!"

The detective's heavy tread mounted the stairs, and died away in the upper hall. "My theory about this case—" began the Inspector heavily. "Good God!"

From somewhere in the rear of the house there came a crash, of such proportions as to suggest a young earthquake.

Voices, dim and muffled through the intervening doors, rose in furious altercation, and then another explosion, louder than the first, brought silence to the old house. Too much silence.

That was all. Miss Withers looked at the Inspector, and he looked back at her. His hand instinctively hovered over the hip on which he had carried no weapon since the memorable day eleven years before when he had taken off his uniform.

Then a square of light showed at the end of the long hall—and was immediately blotted out by something large, imposing, and formidable.

Someone was coming up from the rear, past the dark corner under the stair, out into the full light of the front hall.

It turned out to be a woman, a large woman, built on the general proportions of Grant's Tomb.

She was wearing somewhat askew a hat that was more reminiscent of Mary of England than of Eugenie of France. Wisps of glossy red hair shone from beneath it, and there was a glint of redder fire in her eye. Her fur-trimmed coat was disarrayed.

In one hand she gripped an iron skillet, and as she advanced she kept it poised in readiness to thrust or parry. She stopped at the foot of the stair, legs wide apart and eyes narrow.

"You cut-throats!" she offered. "Come on one at a time and I'll give you what-for!"

Neither Miss Withers nor the Inspector accepted the invitation. At that opportune moment Aunt Abbie appeared at the head of the stair with the Sergeant behind her.

"Amanda!"

The lady with the skillet took a deep breath. "Yes'm?"

"Amanda Hoff, what in the world is the matter? These people are from the police."

The skillet resumed its place as a culinary tool rather than as a weapon.

"The police, ja? Well, it's about time. Why don't you come back and arrest the dead corpse in my kitchen?"

VI

A Mummy Song

“WHAT IN HEAVEN’S NAME—” Inspector Piper snapped out of his coma as if a spring had suddenly been released. “Come on!”

He led the way on the run down the long hall toward the kitchen, followed by the belligerent Mrs. Hoff, and the Sergeant. Aunt Abbie was close behind.

Miss Withers lagged for a moment. It was not that she dreaded whatever she might see in the kitchen. She had no fear of death, at least not when it struck somewhere else.

But something troubled her mind, some subtle sixth sense clamored in the back of her head for attention, crying, “See here! See here!”

It was not the faintly tainted odor of something burning which still pervaded the old house. That she had noticed before.

For a long moment she stood alone, and then all of a sudden the realization came to her. From somewhere in this ancient, decaying mansion there came a contralto voice of exceeding purity, faint but clear. Perhaps it was a radio set or a phonograph—whatever it was, the voice was strangely eerie. It was sweet and haunting, and not altogether human.

There were loud exclamations in the kitchen, Mrs. Hoff’s gutturals among them. But Miss Withers did not hear. She was straining her ears to identify the strange yet hauntingly familiar melody.

She knew it for the solo portion of the duet between Azucena, the old gypsy woman, and her son when both lay in the shadow of death, during the third act of Verdi’s hackneyed *Il Trovatore*. “... ai nostri monti ...” came the faint contralto in the age-old song of sorrow. “Home to our mountains ...”

Even as Miss Withers exclaimed at the quality of that voice, it cracked terribly, harshly—and then continued with a dreadful cacophony to the end of the phrase, a quarter of a note flat!

It was unthinkable that any musically-trained ear could have permitted that grotesque parody to continue—yet continue it did, on to the last warped

quaver. There was a long moment of stillness, and then Miss Withers went thoughtfully on toward the door of the kitchen.

After all, she supposed, the death of a man was more important than the death of a voice.

However, as luck would have it, this man was not entirely and completely dead—perhaps irrevocably is the word, since every sleep is a little death, and McTeague was as sound asleep as he had ever been in his life.

He was still stretched out on the kitchen floor where he had fallen under the crushing weight of Mrs. Hoff's skillet, and there was a sizable lump on his forehead.

Aunt Abbie, with a bustling ineffectiveness, was dribbling water on his wrists and neck, and the breath of life was beginning to suck again through his blue lips.

The Inspector and Mrs. Hoff were facing each other like a couple of bantam roosters—or rather, like a bantam rooster and an ostrich. Honors at present were all to the bantam, as the Inspector let his temper carry him on. Sergeant Taylor had drawn back in admiration.

“Woman, do you realize what you’ve let yourself in for? Assaulting an officer with a deadly weapon, resisting an officer in the course of his duty, mayhem ... why, you’re lucky if you get out of Auburn in time to celebrate your hundredth birthday, you meddling old battle-ax!” He pushed a lean jaw almost into the fat face of the German cook. “Come on, answer me! What in the name of God made you try to murder my best operative?”

The woman shook her head dumbly. “By the back door into mine own kitchen I’m coming, and stands in the middle of the room holding a gun in his fist this man! And a racketeer he was, I’m saying. Ja, I know about these bad ones.”

The Inspector grunted. “Can you prove where you have been for the past three hours?”

“Oh, ja, ja. To the Strand I was.” Mrs. Hoff had definitely decided to get hysterical. “Ach, Gott, and now I haf to burn in what they call the Hot Squat, ja?” She was quivering like a jellyfish.

The Inspector moved his eyebrows a quarter of an inch, and nodded slowly. He turned to Miss Withers. “Hildegarde, what movie is playing at the Strand this week?”

Miss Withers didn't know. But Aunt Abbie stopped doing the Florence Nightingale. "It's a wonderful picture, Inspector. I saw it last night. It's '*What Price Gangster*,' with Chester Morris."

"Ah ha!" The Inspector grinned at Mrs. Hoff. "So you were going to knock poor McTeague for a public enemy, huh?" He leaned forward suddenly. McTeague, under the momentary respite from Aunt Abbie's sprinkling, was coming around. "Hello, Mike!"

The cloudy blue eyes opened, blinked, and gradually came into their normal focus. McTeague shook his head savagely for a moment, and then looked up at the Inspector.

"Come on, Mike. Get up on your pins, you're okay. The old lady took you for Scarface Capone. Come on, this isn't getting us anywhere."

Mike still lay there, staring up at the Inspector. Slowly one eyelid dropped and raised again.

"Huh?" Piper almost dropped his cigar. Then McTeague winked again, twice. It was the old operative's signal, meaning—"I can't talk here—don't recognize me—sit on your cards."

"Come on, back into the other room, all of you!" Piper pointed to the door. "All right, Taylor, take everybody into the front room and keep 'em there."

Then the Inspector was alone with his operative. "What is it, Mike? What's on your mind besides a lump like a hen's egg?"

"Come down here." McTeague's lips formed the words, almost soundlessly. But the big detective made no effort to rise to his feet.

"What's wrong, Mike? Come on, you're all right. Snap out of it."

"Come down here, Inspector!"

Piper got down on his knees, wondering if the operative had gone off his trolley from that crack on the forehead.

McTeague was looking up at the underside of the kitchen table. Piper followed the line of his eyes, and then drew a quick breath.

Pinned to the wooden frame in which the drawer was supposed to slide, the Inspector saw a whitish oblong with a black dot in the center. The dot proved to be a common thumb tack that yielded to the blade of a pen-knife, and the white oblong was a letter.

"Now what sort of foolishness is this?"

The envelope had been folded twice, and showed signs of wear and tear along the folds. Someone had carried it around for quite a while. Piper

smelled of it, and then offered it to McTeague.

“What do you make of that, Mike?”

The big detective sniffed. “Hmmmm—not a dame, Inspector. Smells as if it had been toted around in the pocket of a leather suit for a while.”

“Right—it’s calfskin, that odor. Now let’s see what it says.”

The handwriting on the envelope was in a slanting feminine script. It was addressed to “Mr. Laurie Stait, Keeley’s Lazy Y Ranch, Medicine Hat, Wyoming.” The postmark was dated “New York, July 18th”—of the previous summer.

The Inspector had no scruples about drawing out the single sheet of expensive note paper, which also showed signs of much handling. Whoever had carried the envelope had read and re-read its contents often, he figured. The note itself was short and to the point.

“Dearest—(it began)

“I am writing to tell you that you were right and I was very wrong, not only about us but about Lew. The only reason I ever loved him was because he is so much like you. For that reason I can’t hurt him by telling him, there must be a better way.”

“Now we’re gettin’ somewhere,” said McTeague cheerfully, forgetting his bump as he stared over the Inspector’s shoulder.

The Inspector read on. “But I say now, as I refused to say when we parted, I love you more than anybody else in this world, and nobody, not even Lew, is going to stand in our way—always, your Dana.”

Painstakingly the Inspector folded it back into the envelope. His face was grave.

So a girl had loved both the Stait twins—and sworn that nobody was going to stand in the way of her getting Laurie! Well, it looked as if something *had* stood in the way. That something was a length of limber hemp.

“You know, chief, it’s smart to think of planting a letter there,” McTeague pointed out. “There wasn’t a chance in a million that we’d find it, but we got a lucky break.” McTeague grinned and rubbed his forehead.

“Yeah. Well, Mike, don’t ever let anybody tell you that this business isn’t just full of lucky breaks. Now get back on your post, and try to keep your thick skull out of the way of falling kitchenware.”

Piper started back up the hall, wondering just what the letter in his pocket was going to mean. He noticed as he came out of the kitchen that

another door opened into the rear of the hall. Probably the rear stair—no, upon investigation it proved to be the passage to the musty-smelling cellar. Evidently this house, like so many of its kind, had no servant's stair. Well, that simplified a few things.

Sergeant Taylor was just putting down the phone. "Oh, Inspector, Headquarters on the wire. Doc Bloom's assistant reports that Stait could not have taken his own life, and the case goes down in the Medical Examiner's records as *Murder*. Death caused by snapping the vertebra, and it was instantaneous. Preliminary autopsy showed no sign of drugs, either a dose or habitual. Brain showed a trace of alky, though. That's all, I guess—I knew you were busy, so I took the message. Oh, yes, they found in the Morgue that the pelvis was cracked, too. But only minor abrasions of the skin."

"Okay, Taylor. Where's everybody?"

The Sergeant nodded toward the living room. "Aunt Abbie whatshername and the cook are in there. Your lady friend spent some time comforting the cook, and then went upstairs."

"Upstairs! What did Miss Withers do that for? I'm saving the upstairs for later."

Piper turned and ran up the steps. "I never knew it to fail," he was muttering. "Women can do more damage in ten minutes ..."

There was no sign of Miss Withers when he reached the second floor hallway. The lights of the Drive were shining through the open door of the front bedroom, and the Inspector came down the hall and gave it a once over. Aunt Abbie's room, beyond a doubt. Ribbons held back the white curtains, doilies lay primly on every table, there was a stupid looking canary in a gilt cage—a frowsy, slightly bald-looking canary—and on the bureau a framed photograph of that remarkable Hollywood Thespian, Mr. Clark Gable, no doubt signed by his secretary.

"Hrrmp," remarked the Inspector. He retraced his steps. The next door opened into a vast and uncomfortable-looking bath, with much exposed piping and a tremendous tub set in oak. There were four prim guest towels on a rack. "I'd hate to live in this dump," Piper told himself.

He came out of the bathroom, and ran almost head on into Miss Withers. He seized her arm. "Hildegarde! Where have you been, and what in God's name started you poking around up here? We haven't got any search warrant for this house!"

“One question at a time,” the school-teacher said calmly. “First, I’ve been rambling through the halls trying to trace down a phantom voice that I heard, or thought I heard. I went way up to the attic floor, too, but I didn’t hear anything more. There’s a light showing under the door of the top floor, and two bedrooms on the floor above us. I suppose that’s Cousin Hubert in one, and the maid in the other. Nobody heard me and I didn’t disturb anything, so don’t get such an annoyed look on your face.”

The Inspector stuck out his lower lip. “It’s just like a woman to upset the routine procedure,” he informed her. “I don’t suppose you happen to know which would be the bedroom of the dead twin, do you? It’s the only one we have a right to search.”

Miss Withers shook her head. “We might try that door there in the rear,” she said sagely. “It’s the only unexplored territory.”

They came into a long room with two windows facing on the backyard, a room with twin bookcases, twin bureaus, and of course, twin beds—of ancient walnut. Miss Withers went at once to the bookcase, while Piper surveyed the rest of the place.

The only decorations in the room were a collection of pipes—merschaum, student, clay and briar—between the beds, and on a peg above the bookcase a well-worn saddle of the McClellan type, with an imitation silver-mounted pommel. Attached to it by means of the end of a rawhide quirt were a couple of spurs, likewise silvered.

Two heavy leather chairs completed the furnishings. Miss Withers sank into one of them gratefully, a book in her hand which brought back her own childhood. It was *Toby Tyler—or Ten Weeks With a Circus* and the title page bore a boyish scrawl—“To Laurie from Lew”—X-mas 1921.”

“I think Sherlock Holmes’ brother had the right idea about this detective business,” she remarked. “Remember him? He sat in an armchair all the time.”

“Nonsense,” the Inspector told her, testily. “That theory stuff is silly. You can’t get anywhere in an armchair. You can’t see anything from an armchair. Put away the book, and we’ll get somewhere.” He stuck his head out of the closet where he had been rummaging. “The main thing in this business is to keep rustling around.”

He disappeared again. A few minutes later he reappeared, dusty and disgruntled.

Miss Withers, smarting under his remarks, let her voice have the slightest suggestion of a barb in it “Well, did your rustling around discover any clues in that closet as to why Laurie Stait appeared on Fifth Avenue wearing a rope?”

“No, there’s nothing in there but a lot of clothes, mostly duplicates, some shoes, and some old magazines and junk.”

“By any chance did there happen to be an empty picture frame twelve inches by fifteen or thereabouts?” Miss Withers was casual.

The Inspector almost jumped. “You’ve been snooping in there!”

“I have not,” said Miss Withers triumphantly. “But I knew it was there. From where I sit in this chair I can see a light square on the wall, over there between the bureaus. See it?”

“See what?”

“Well, doesn’t that suggest to you that perhaps someone took down a picture recently? There’s enough dust in this town so that it must have been recently.”

“But why must the frame be empty?” The Inspector was humbler.

“That was a wild guess,” admitted Miss Withers, conscious of her victory. “But it seemed natural that if someone wanted a picture off the wall, he’d keep the frame, at least ... and throw away the picture.” Her forehead wrinkled. “Or suppose he didn’t throw away the picture?”

There was a wastebasket by the door, but it was empty. The picture hadn’t gone there, at any rate—not today. And Miss Withers had an idea that very few hours had passed since that strangely clean spot on the wall was covered.

“Oscar—suppose you wanted to hide a picture, in a room like this. Where would you put it?”

The Inspector was thoughtful. “Let me see. Behind the wall-paper ? No, that would be difficult to get loose and more difficult to get stuck on again. Under a carpet—but there’s only scatter-rugs in this room.”

“We’ve got to do better than this,” Miss Withers reminded him. “Could it be in one of those books—no, they’re all too small for a picture that size. Under the lining of one of the bureau drawers?”

“I’ve got an idea!” The Inspector was galvanized into action. Swiftly, while Miss Withers watched, he drew out the drawers of both bureaus. He didn’t look under the linings, but hoisted each drawer up over his head and stared intently at the underside.

He found what he was looking for under the next to the last drawer, pinned with four thumb tacks against the bottom.

“Somebody is smart,” he observed. “Most people think of hiding an article on top of something, not underneath it. We’re all accustomed to laying things down, not sticking them up.” But he didn’t explain how the idea had come to him.

Nor did Miss Withers give him the congratulations he was angling for. She was staring at the photograph in his hand.

It showed the head of a striking looking young woman of twenty or thereabouts, a girl with light tawny hair curled at the ends, above whose wide eyes were stuck two ridiculously diminutive eyebrows. The mouth was firm and resolute, for all the sculptured softness of the lips.

“She looks to me like a girl who’d get anything she wanted, or *else*,” observed Miss Withers.

The Inspector nodded slowly. A single sentence rang through his brain. “I love you more than anybody else in the world and nobody ... is going to stand in our way.” Those were the words written on that sheet of crisp notepaper tucked away in his pocket.

There was writing on the bottom of the photograph, writing that was vaguely familiar to the Inspector.

“To Lew, with all my love,” it read. It was signed “Your Dana.”

VII

Abaft the Mizz'mast

"WELL, THIS IS THE DOOR," said Miss Withers in a whisper. She and the Inspector were standing on the attic-floor landing, in semi-darkness. "Though I wish you'd tell me what you expect to find out from the old lady."

"You'll see," Piper told her. He rapped on the door. The only answer was a thick, almost gummy silence.

He knocked again, this time with the heel of his hand. There was a booming echo inside, together with faint thumpings and stirrings and rustlings that betokened someone's stealthy presence.

"May I trouble you a moment, Mrs. Stait?"

A shrill cackle of inhuman, uncanny laughter answered him. But no one came to the door.

"Hello in there! Mrs. Stait, this is the police. We must ask you a few questions!" Piper knocked again, this time with a clenched fist. He had had no dinner this night, and he had exhausted his stock of patience.

"I say, Inspector!" a voice interrupted from the foot of the stairs. "It's no use with Gran. She'll do just as she pleases."

It was Hubert, outside the door of his room, in dressing gown and slippers. "She'll send for you when she's willing to see you."

"Oh, yes? Well, she'll see me now. I represent the law here in this house. And besides, something may have happened to the old lady." The Inspector rapped again. "Mrs. Stait, if you don't open this door I'm going to kick it in."

"Why don't you try the knob first?" Miss Withers suggested.

Automatically the Inspector dropped his hand to the knob, and it turned easily. The door opened inward—and a thick, musty odor struck their faces. The room was black as pitch. "There ought to be a light switch just inside the door here," said Piper, fumbling through the darkness.

His fingers collided with something which was not a light switch, and there was the smash of breaking glass as something toppled to the floor.

“What in the devil ... a lamp in this place?...”

But the Inspector didn't get a fair start with what he was intending to say. From across the room there burst an avalanche of purple language, double strength and 100-proof, that sizzled around his ears.

“Hellfire! Hellfire and Brimstone! Batten down your hatches and stand by to repel boarders, you stinking lubbers ... where's the Skipper, the Skipper? ... Here Fido, here Fido, sic 'em Fido ... Bloody, bloody boogies, all of you!”

“Great Scott, what's that?”

The harsh old voice went on without pausing to draw breath. “Hell and damnation ... stowaways, Skipper, stowaways ... feed the sharks, Skipper ... Belay me for a bloody lubber ... Rats, Fido, rats ... Help, murder, bloody murder!”

Miss Withers had firm hold of the Inspector's arm. She could see nothing, not even the glow of light from a window ... nor could she hear anything except that rush of full-flavored language.

At that moment a further door, across the room, opened suddenly, disclosing the tall, gaunt figure of an old woman in a red shawl. Beneath the shawl, Miss Withers could see by the flickering light of a kerosene lamp held in the old lady's hand, she wore a dress that had once been black silk, but that now was a purplish green with dust and age.

Her face was as seamed and wrinkled as a dried russet apple, and her little beady eyes gleamed out of dark caverns in her skull.

She spoke, in a voice that was strangely younger than herself. “That dratted parrot! Quiet, Skipper!”

Sitting on a perch across the impossibly cluttered room, a fat, featherless monstrosity squawked once and then subsided obediently.

In all her thirty-nine years Miss Withers had never seen a dodo, except in one of Sir John Tenniel's fantastic drawings. But this unspeakably-evil fat naked slug, with its tremendous hooked beak and its expression of cheerful malevolence, was as close to being that extinct horror of the Indian Ocean as anything she could imagine.

“Policemen are always the same,” said the old lady none too pleasantly. “Always a lot of blackguards, bursting their way into decent people's homes and shooting innocent bystanders while the footpads flourish and wax fat.”

“Excuse the intrusion, Madam, but it was necessary. It’s about your grandson Laurie.”

“I will *not* bail him out if he’s in trouble again, and that’s final!” The old lady stalked toward the inner door. “Laurie has been a disgrace to this family since his birth.”

“He’ll never be a disgrace to this family again,” cut in the Inspector hastily. “You see, Mrs. Stait, your grandson has been killed!”

She turned around, a look of polite incredulity. “Killed? Don’t be silly. The Staits don’t have such things happen to them. He’s not dead. Pour water on him. Probably he’s been scorching at the cocktail bar down at the Haymarket.”

“But you don’t understand, Mrs. Stait. Your grandson has been *murdered!*”

“Rats, rats, Fido, rats! Bloody murder, boys!” The parrot caught his gnarled claws around his perch and hung head downwards, swinging merrily. “Bloody murder abaft the mizz’mast! Belay him good, Skipper! Skrrrrrrrrrrr!”

“Hush, Skipper!” The elderly bird cocked one eye and leered horribly at Miss Withers.

His mistress carefully lowered the wick of her lamp. “Murdered, hey? Well, he can’t say I didn’t warn him. I always said that boy would come to no good end. And it’s a happy day for the Stait family that he’s gone, that’s all I say. Always going out with low companions. Late hours and too many girls. Nothing like my younger grandson, Lew.”

“Younger? But aren’t they *twins*?” The Inspector’s jaw dropped.

Mrs. Stait glared at him. “Yes, younger. I’m old, but *I’m* not in my second childhood, young man. Did you think twins came into the world neck and neck, like racehorses on the home stretch? Laurie was born at midnight some twenty-four years ago, and Lew came at one o’clock. Like as two pins, they were, only Laurie was always yelling and Lew never did anything more than snivvle. Twins have only morals enough for one, and Lew got ’em all.”

“I just want to ask you a few questions, Mrs. Stait.” The Inspector coughed hesitatingly, and Miss Withers got out her notebook. “Have you any idea as to who had a reason to kill your grandson?”

“Why should I tell you if I did?” The heartless old lady was heading again for the door of her bedroom. “I’m not being paid to play Hawkshaw,

mister policeman. That worthless grandson of mine deserved just what he got, besides. Now get out of here, and take your typewriter with you.”

Miss Withers realized, after a moment’s wonder, that she was the “typewriter” referred to.

“But Mrs. Stait, won’t you tell me what you mean when you say that Laurie deserved what happened to him?”

“*Girls,*” said the old lady. “Too many girls. Always in trouble. Only the other day a man was here. I didn’t see him, but he was here. Said his sister was in trouble—told it to our family lawyer, who happened to be downstairs. Blamed Laurie. Unpleasant man with very bad accent, so Charles says. Charles Waverly—a distant branch of our family, and a fine barrister. He’s going to settle the case if it’s possible. Ask questions of him from now on. I don’t choose to be disturbed. I bid you a very good evening. Now get out of here.”

“Bloody murder,” yelled Skipper from his perch. “Below decks, ye bloody scum! Give ’em the cat-o-nine-tails, Skipper! Hell and damnation!”

“Nice bird, that,” said Inspector Piper. His hand was on the door-knob.

“He’s more of a gentleman than you are, for all his language,” said the old lady tartly. “Skipper is well along on his second century, and he’s learned a plenty in his day. He’s been around the world three times on a Baltimore clipper, that parrot has. And he’s lived here in this room for twenty years without breaking a lamp chimney, as you did the first minute you got inside. You could learn manners from him, mister policeman.”

“One thing more, madam. Do you know any girl named Dana?”

“Dana? You mean Dana Waverly? Of course I know Dana. Fine girl. Going to marry Lew one of these days. It’s been arranged since before she was born. Engaged for the past two years. None of this silly modern stuff about her. She’d fight for her man with tooth and claw. But you leave Dana out of this mess of Laurie’s, d’you hear? Now get out of my rooms before I throw you out.”

Frail and trembling, the gaunt old lady raised the lamp as if to hurl it across the room. The parrot took up the cry.

“Shiver my timbers, but they’re a bunch of bloody sons-a-sluts! Yeeeeek, yeeeeek, buckets of blood, buckets of blood. Sling him from the stern at a rope’s end, Skipper. Hell fire!”

With that final greeting from the irate Skipper, who was jumping up and down on his perch and waving his featherless flippers, the door closed

behind Miss Withers and the Inspector.

They looked at each other, wordlessly. Then they went down the stair. The phone was ringing in the lower hall, ringing with a persistent nagging note that was somehow like the screaming “Skrrrrrr” of the parrot upstairs.

“I’ll take it,” called out Piper as he saw the Sergeant moving down the hall.

The voice at the other end was a familiar one—that of the cop on special duty in his own office at Headquarters.

“Hello, Inspector? Just got something that’ll interest you. Yeah. The boys went over the Chrysler, but no prints except the stiff’s. Yeah. Nothing else that didn’t belong. Ignition key in the dashboard. No marks on the cushions. No sign of any place where the rope could have been tied, and then pulled loose.”

“Well, what else?”

“The post office sent over a *leather* that they found in the outgoing mail about ten minutes ago, Inspector. One of the collectors got it in a late round this afternoon, stuck away in one of the letter boxes. He’s not sure which building, but it’s in the general district where the Stait guy was bumped. Yeah, that’s what pickpockets always do with a wallet. Lift the dough and then drop it through the slot so it won’t pin a rap on them later. Only this leather had twenty-five bucks still in it ... and what’s more, it has a half a dozen swell engraved cards with the name Lewis Maitland Stait Yeah. That’s the brother of the stiff, ain’t it?”

Piper said, “Yes,” and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Anything else, Joe?”

“No, nothing else, Inspector—oh, wait a minute. Here comes a messenger from Van Donnen’s office with the rope you wanted him to look over.”

“Good! What’s the expert testimony in the rope? Read it quick.”

“Dr. Van Donnen says it’s not a rope at all, it’s a lariat or *reata*. Belongs out west somewhere. Signs of animal hair, probably shorthorn cattle. Tensile strength three hundred pounds or more. The binding of blue thread at the end is from Woolworth’s, though. Yeah, Woolworth’s. Well, he says he’s sure. And the knot isn’t a hangman’s noose at all, it’s just a running slip knot, spliced into place. That’s all.”

“That’s plenty, Joe. See you tomorrow morning.” The Inspector hung up.

He told Miss Withers the latest news. "Laurie Stait goes out west to a dude ranch this summer, and we find him with a lariat around his neck a few months later. You don't suppose that we've got a tangible clew of this hodge-podge, do you? Putting two and two together ..."

"The trouble with you, Oscar, is that you always put two and two together and make a baker's dozen out of it," Miss Withers told him.

The Inspector nodded. "Maybe. But when you put the dude ranch and the lariat together with the fact that there's been a Rodeo at the Madison Square Garden all week ..."

"And what is a Rodeo?" They were preparing to leave. Miss Withers yawned politely.

"Oh, a bunch of crazy hoodlums put on a Wild West show, with a lot of riding wild horses and bulldogging steers and rope tricks."

"You don't suppose," said Miss Withers casually, "that there was a gentleman at the Rodeo who knew some rope tricks that weren't part of the program?"

McTeague had gone home to nurse the lump on his forehead, and Sergeant Taylor was relaxed in a chair in the front hall, on special duty for the rest of the night. Miss Withers and the Inspector came down the front steps together, and paused for a moment to look between the houses at the full moon, which hung like a great white skull in the sky.

"The Police have the case well in hand and an arrest is expected hourly," quoted the Inspector bitterly. From somewhere in the decaying mansion they had just left came the muffled sound of shrill derisive laughter. It might have been from the little maid Gretchen or the lewd centenarian parrot that Mrs. Stait called Skipper.

Miss Withers thought it a fitting end for the first day of this mad murder case.

VIII

The Valkyrie Gets Taken for a Ride

THE INSPECTOR AROSE AN hour earlier than was his custom next morning. It was entirely too early for Mrs. McFeeters, the amiable but light-fingered shop-lifter who “did” for him. She had reformed, in so far as shoplifting went, but she still snatched forty winks whenever she could. He made himself a quick cup of under-strong and over-hot coffee, slipped into his heaviest ulster, and let himself out into the knifelike air of the New York morning.

“And right here is where little Oscar pulls a fast one and gets hot on the trail—alone,” he said to himself happily. “I’ll show Hildegarde Withers!”

Instead of taking his usual course downtown toward his office, with its miniature Chamber of Horrors around the wall-cases, he headed straight west, across town. The Inspector was in a good humor. The crisp air, more like January than November, put the Stait murder case in a new light. Last night it had seemed, well,—involved to say the least. What with the cook and the naked parrot and that inhuman old lady in the attic. All that would be washed up in short order this morning, and Miss Withers would have demonstrated before her eyes the power of the organized police.

The first cigar of the day was always the best for Inspector Piper. It was, as a rule, the only one he ever managed to smoke through. He blew the smoke in twisting rings from his mouth as he strode up Fifty-seventh Street.

By the time he reached Eighth Avenue, and turned down toward the looming gray atrocity which is called Madison Square Garden because it is not anything like a garden and is several miles from Madison Square, the Inspector was able to pass the newsboys’ ramparts of morning papers without wincing at “STRANGLER STILL AT LARGE—POLICE POWERLESS” ... or “NOOSE KILLER SLAYS PLAYBOY” ...

He strode gaily in at the main entrance of the Garden, past the arcade with its windows full of snappy suits and snappier wrist-watches. Except for a couple of cats who evidently were still set on making a night of it, and

a cleaning man with a mop who was presumably posing for slow-motion pictures, there was no sign of life in the open-roofed lobby.

The box office kiosk, of course, was locked. It would be at this ungodly hour of seven-thirty. The cleaning man, poking dully at endless little islands of dried chewing gum, answered his enquiries with a jerk of the thumb toward the inner doors.

Inspector Piper had his hand against the panel when the door swung violently toward him and Miss Withers stepped out, her umbrella under her arm and a belligerent look on her face ... a look which changed to pained surprise.

“Oscar! Excuse me! Did I hurt you?”

The Inspector wasn’t hurt. He murmured something. Then he took out his flavorless cigar, glared at it, and hurled it in the direction of the nearest cat, who dodged without taking her attention from what she hoped would develop into an interesting relic of bologna skin. The morsel turned out to be cellophane, but that is neither here nor there.

“You needn’t look so unglad to see me,” Miss Withers told the Inspector. “Anyway, I’ve saved you fifteen minutes traipsing around inside there. I had plenty of trouble finding out what we want to know, but I finally got hold of a sort of janitor. And he told me what I ought to have known in the first place ... that the cowboys don’t come around here except for rehearsal or when the Rodeo is actually on in the afternoon and evening. The horses and cattle are stabled in a warehouse three blocks away on Eleventh Avenue, and the riders are at the Hotel Senator.”

“The Senator? Why, that’s on Forty-fourth Street over near Fifth Avenue ...”

“Exactly. And it’s a couple of stone’s throws from where Laurie Stait met with an accident last night. I thought of that, too. In case you’re interested, the manager of the outfit is a Mr. Carrigan. And here is a program of the show, which I picked out of the janitors’ trash basket.”

The Inspector took the gaudy sheet, printed in red and black on a luminous yellow paper. “Well, here we are. All about Carrigan’s Annual Rodeo—a thousand thrills of daring and skill, according to the blurb. Wild-west at its best—a poetical fellow, this Carrigan, if he writes his own advertising. Riding, roping, bull-dogging—throwing and tying contests, broncho busting, chariot races, fancy sharpshooting ...”

“Have they got Eliza Crossing the Ice, too?” inquired Miss Withers.

“Probably, though they don’t mention any bloodhounds.” Suddenly the Inspector pressed a stubby forefinger against a note halfway down the sheet. “Will you get a load of this!”

“If you mean look at it, I shall be glad to do so,” reprimanded Miss Withers. “Let me see ... ‘Third Event—Fancy Shooting—Mr. Laramie White assisted by Miss Rose Keeley ... Fourth Event—Roping Three-horse Team in Full Gallop—(Horses for this Event by Lazy Y ranch)—Mr. Buck Keeley. Fifth Event—Roping Contest with Wild Yearling Steer—Entries, Mr. Laramie White, Mr. Sam Gowdy, Mr. Buck Keeley ...’ Is that what you mean?”

Inspector Piper was triumphant. “That’s it. Ever hear that last name before?”

Miss Withers was thoughtful. “No, not that I remember. I don’t follow the sporting pages to any considerable extent.”

The Inspector was in good humor again. “Naturally you wouldn’t catch this, being a woman. That shows the power of the trained detective mind, Hildegard. You’ve been lucky, and clever, too. I won’t argue against that. But this isn’t any chess game of wits with a would-be mastermind criminal. And in this case it’s the little things that a trained mind remembers that will bring the murderer to justice.”

“Oscar Piper! What in heaven’s name are you talking about?”

They had gravitated toward a little Coffee Potte in the arcade of the Garden entrance. “Sit down and have a poached egg with me and I’ll point out the detail you missed,” said the Inspector.

“On the force (he began) we learn very early the importance of remembering names. We do it by hooking them up with other names, see? Suppose a fellow’s name is Moses, I ask myself if he doesn’t play pool, see? Remember Moses in the pool of bulrushes? And then if I want to remember his name months later I think of pool and then of Moses. Simple, isn’t it?”

Miss Withers was visibly unimpressed. “That’s no deep police secret,” she informed him. “That little trick is known as ‘association of ideas’ and it dates back to William James and probably before. But go on, why should I remember the name Jack Keeley or whatever it was?”

“Buck, Buck Keeley,” corrected the Inspector. “When I saw the name on the letter last night I remembered the old-fashioned idea about taking the Keeley-cure for drunks, see? Well, that ticketed the name in the back of my

mind, and now when I see it again on the program here, I put two and two together.”

He stopped suddenly at the look on Miss Withers’ face. She wasn’t attacking her poached egg.

“Oscar Piper, are you holding out on me?”

He felt guilty. All too late he remembered that he hadn’t intended mentioning the letter under the kitchen table.

“Why, no, Hildegarde. I ...”

“If that isn’t like a man! The superior sex, huh? So you had to look to your laurels this time? Just to prove to me that a woman can’t be a detective!”

The Inspector was nettled. But Miss Withers wouldn’t let him speak.

“All right, Oscar Piper. I was going to send a substitute down to my third grade classes for the rest of the month. But if that’s the way you feel about it, you can just go blundering ahead alone. And to think I very nearly married you!”

“But Hildegarde ...”

Miss Withers shoved her egg away as if it had mortally offended her patrician nose, and seized her umbrella.

“Be reasonable, will you? I meant to tell you about that letter sometime. We’ll work on the case together.”

“I never want to work on another case anyhow,” Miss Withers informed him. “I hope I never hear of another murder nor meet another flatfooted detective as long as I live. I’m through, and I mean it. I haven’t the slightest interest in sleuthing ...”

She was moving toward the door. But she stopped, suddenly, her cotton umbrella gripped tensely in her hand.

From somewhere within the vast expanses of the Garden, muffled by the intervening walls, there came a couple of dull *thump-thumps* ... another ...

It might have been the slamming of a door, or the backfiring of a dirty truck engine.

But it was neither of the two, and both Miss Withers and the Inspector knew it. There is something about the staccato bark of a forty-five calibre revolver that, once heard, is never confused with anything else.

The sound of shots came again, a regular fusillade.

Miss Withers raised her umbrella like a couched lance. “What in heaven’s name are you waiting for? Oscar, come on!”

The Inspector came on, swinging in the long stride that had won a silver cup or two in earlier Police Field Days. But all the same, Miss Withers, who had no interest in sleuthing, beat him through the entrance of the Garden by at least two lengths.

There was no sign of the janitor-like individual who had grudgingly given out information a few minutes before. The main entrance hall of the Garden was empty and almost dark, though a dim glow showed through an entrance marked “M to Q.”

They ran up a short slope of concrete, and came out high above the great bowl—the bowl which was more like a saucer now. The wide rim consisted of row upon row of board seats, and the oval in the center was bare, and scattered with tanbark. They stopped to take in a puzzling panorama.

The Inspector had never been in the Garden before when this center space was not filled with seats optimistically labelled “ringside” and faced toward a squared bit of canvas platform beneath glaring floodlights.

The floodlights were on full blast, and in their glare sat a big blonde girl on a big white horse, both of them as rigid as if cut out of marble. There was some sort of a dark screen or background behind them, against which smoke curled lazily upward from a cigarette between the lips of the girl. She wore pink tights and short boots, and in spite of the costume she might have posed as one of the Valkyrie.

As they watched, she raised her gloved hand in a quick signal, and from the shadows at the far end of the auditorium another horse and rider appeared, at full gallop.

This horse was a plump little red and white paint, and he ran by bunching up his body and kicking viciously at the ground as it passed by. His rider was a lean and lanky young man dressed only in shirt, black trousers, and high-heeled boots. With his left hand he held the reins loosely, and his right gripped a massive but business-like revolver.

As he swung past the waiting girl he leaned forward in the saddle and discharged his weapon in her general direction.

She did not, as Miss Withers had halfway expected, fall into a crumpled heap. She only took the cigarette out of her mouth, looked at it

thoughtfully, and made an unprintable observation. The white horse switched his tail impatiently.

The male rider pulled his mount on its haunches and lit a cigarette of his own.

A small man in a derby rose suddenly from one of the front seats at the edge of the tanbark.

“Lousy,” he gave as his verdict. “Plenty lousy. You didn’t come within a mile of it, Laramie. Try it again.”

Laramie shrugged his shoulders and looked at the girl. “Rose moved her head,” he suggested, in the tone of one who does not expect to be believed.

“I moved nothing,” she said, in a soft yet penetrating drawl. “You’re getting the jitters worser every day, Laramie. Can’t you see out of the *good* eye, even? That slug was a good five inches away from the hot end of the cigarette. I could hear it go by.”

“All right, all right,” broke in the nervous man in the derby. “Try it again. You’ve either got to get a better average than one in three or else we’ll have to cut the number entirely—unless we go back to the way it was last year. We can’t go on using the fake cigarette on the thread. Somebody is going to catch on, the way they did about the cactus burrs under the saddles on those broncs in Chi, and we’ll get the razz in the papers.”

“All right, we’ll try it again,” said Laramie, reining up the paint. “But I tell you this for the last time, Carrigan, I ain’t going back to the act the way it was last year. If we do the number at all, I’m holding the gun and Rose is holding the cigarette, see? I ain’t going to let any dame throw lead at me.”

“Well, why not? Rose is as good a shot as you, and she doesn’t get rattled as easy. I don’t see why after two years of it, you have to switch places with her.”

“Neither do I, for that matter,” said Rose, her red lips curled scornfully. Miss Withers and the Inspector by this time had crept down unnoticed almost to the ring itself. And the little school-teacher couldn’t help noticing that a glance was exchanged between the sharpshooter on the horse and the human target, which was not altogether professional jealousy. There was a mutual understanding, and a mutual antagonism, hidden there.

“All right, get on with it. The rest of the boys will be here in a little while, and then we’ll have to quit monkeying with your number. All set?”

He slid back into his seat again, but then he noticed that the girl was looking over his shoulder.

“*Rubes*, Carrigan!” sang out Rose, in a voice that was all too clear. “They must have left those front doors on the latch again.”

Carrigan whirled around to face the intruders. “Look here,” he said belligerently, “this is a private rehearsal, not a public park. The performance doesn’t start until two o’clock this afternoon. If you want to come back then, buy a ticket.”

“He’s wrong,” said Miss Withers softly. “The performance has already begun.”

“Go on, scram,” yelled Carrigan. “Find your way out the way you came in or I’ll call a cop and have you thrown out.”

Inspector Piper smiled faintly, and squared his shoulders. “Oh, so you’ll call a cop and have us thrown out?”

“That’s what I said! An’ maybe I won’t bother to call a cop!”

The Inspector flashed his badge in the palm of his hand. “If you want to call a cop, you don’t need to strain your voice, Mr. Carrigan. I’m Inspector Piper of the Homicide Squad, and this is my assistant. I came up here to ask you some questions.”

“Why, sure, Inspector! Howdy, ma’am. Have yourself a couple of seats. I didn’t get you at first. Anything I can do ... I suppose this is about licenses for the guns we use in the show? They told us it would be all right as long as the boys didn’t wear ’em in the street.”

“No,” admitted Inspector Piper. “I’m not bothering with the Sullivan Law these days. I just wanted to ask you a question or two about a man named Keeley, Buck Keeley?”

The girl suddenly galvanized into action, slid out of her saddle. She strode toward the little group, her fists clenched and her eyes blazing. For the first time Miss Withers realized what a formidable person this Valkyrie of the plains could be.

“What do you want to know about my brother?” she demanded fiercely.

The Inspector stared at her. “So Buck Keeley of the Lazy Y ranch is your brother, eh? Well, maybe you can tell me where he was between five-thirty and seven o’clock last night?”

She didn’t hesitate for the fraction of a second. “I sure can, Marshal. I don’t know what you want him for, but my brother wasn’t into any mischief

last night. Because he was with me, in my room at the Senator. I was feeling low, 'count of some hard luck I've had lately, and Buck had chuck with me up in my room on the tenth floor. He bunks downstairs with the boys, but he most generally chows with me."

"I see. What time did your brother join you?"

"We went over from here together as soon as the afternoon show was done and the horses put back in the corral we rigged up in an old warehouse down the road. That must have been about five."

"And your brother was with you all the time until after dinner?"

"That's what I said, Marshal. All the time. Just ask the rest of the boys. Ask Laramie here. Hey, Laramie, wasn't Buck with me for dinner at the hotel last night?"

The lean and lanky young man came cantering up on the paint, wiping his face. "Huh?" Miss Withers noticed that he had sticking plaster over his left eye.

"I asked you, wasn't Buck with me in the hotel at five-thirty last night?"

"Him? Why, er—yes, of course he was. Sure he was." Laramie turned to Carrigan, and his good eye dropped a quarter of an inch. Miss Withers pretended not to notice it.

"Hey, Tom, wasn't Buck with his sister last night around chow time?"

Up to this time Carrigan had stood there, chewing at his moustache. "Why sure he was. He went right over to the hotel after the show. You must be thinking of somebody else, Inspector." He was a little more eager to agree than seemed necessary to Miss Withers.

"Good," grunted Inspector Piper. He faced the girl again. "By the way," he said casually, "are you any relation to the Keeley family that runs a dude ranch out at Medicine Hat, Wyoming?"

She shook her head. "Our ranch isn't at Medicine Hat, Marshal. That's where we get our mail, but the ranch is a long drive from the railroad ... up in the Johnson's Hole country on the edge of the Tetons."

"But you and your brother run a dude ranch there?"

She nodded. "Why not? This rodeo business only is good for a few months in the spring and fall. Everybody does it out there."

"I was just asking," said the Inspector heavily. "A young fellow I know was out there this summer. Laurie Stait was the name."

If he expected her to show any emotion, the Inspector was disappointed. “Yeah, he was with us for a while. Guess he had a good time, too.”

“Heard from him since he came back to the city?” The Inspector’s voice was thick with sarcasm.

But the blonde Valkyrie shook her head. “No, I haven’t heard from him. Nor my brother either.”

“You’re lying,” said the Inspector soberly. “You see, we’ve found your letters in Laurie Stait’s bureau . . . yours and your brother’s, too. Don’t you think you’d better talk?” He let his voice become wheedling and persuasive.

Her eyes were narrow. “Marshal, you think I’m a hick, don’t you? You’re trying to bluff me, and you aren’t getting anywhere. You didn’t find any letters, or you wouldn’t be trying to trap me into saying something about them. Come on, let’s see the letters you think I wrote to that tenderfoot of a Stait kid. I don’t see what difference it makes, though. Is it any skin off *your* back porch?”

If this was a bluff she was carrying it through, Miss Withers decided. Good heavens, hadn’t the girl even seen the newspapers that blared from every corner this morning?

The Inspector asked her that. Rose Keeley shook her head. “We don’t truck much with newspapers where I come from,” she admitted. “Why should I ought to have read the paper this morning particular? The only reading material I got any use for is the Montgomery Ward catalogue and True Story. Besides, we got something to do besides read newspapers—or stand around here and talk to you, either.”

The Inspector, by adroit manipulation on the part of his tongue, pushed his dead cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. His lower lip slid out a little farther than was necessary.

“Then you didn’t read the papers, or hear the news, eh? I suppose it’ll come as a considerable shock to you to know that Laurie Stait was murdered last night!”

The girl’s eyes widened, in what Miss Withers swore to be honest surprise. “Laurie Stait *murdered* . . . last night?”

“Yes, murdered,” said the Inspector savagely. He was angry that he had shot his bolt without securing any damaging admission from the girl in the moment of shock. “He was riding along in his brother’s roadster, and somebody dropped a lariat over his head, slick and pretty.”

The Inspector didn't need to finish. He'd secured his effect, after all. Miss Withers cried out as she saw the blood drain from the girl's blank face. Then Rose Keeley's splendid big body suddenly went lifeless as an empty sack.

She fell face down in the tanbark, and for a long moment the rest of them watched her, powerless to move. Even at that moment Miss Withers could not help noticing the look of utter unbelief on the faces of Carrigan and the rider, Laramie. They could not have been more nonplussed if Rose Keeley had suddenly disappeared in a pillar of smoke.

But she had not disappeared. She was sprawled like an empty sack in the tanbark.

Miss Withers moved to pick her up, but Laramie White was quicker.

IX

Hubert Cries “Wolf”

“I’LL ... I’LL GET SOME water ...” gasped Miss Withers. But Carrigan elbowed her aside.

“We’ll take care of Rose,” he said roughly. “Haven’t you done harm enough already? Take your hands off her!”

“Young man, I ...”

But Inspector Piper nodded to her. “Come on, Hildegarde.” The girl who had fainted so unexpectedly was already murmuring something, and showing signs of life. “She’s all right. Let’s get out of here.”

She followed him up the ramp. “But what’s the hurry? We might have found something out.”

“We did find something out,” he told her. “Plenty. And those fellows will see that she doesn’t say anything else, now. We’ll take another try when her precious brother is here, unless we pick him up first. I’ve got to get back to my office, there’s plenty to settle.”

“There is,” agreed Miss Withers grimly, as she climbed into a taxi-cab. “And the first thing is this, Oscar Piper. We were discussing a little matter in the restaurant when we heard that shooting.”

He was thoughtful. “Yes, Hildegarde, we’ll settle that. So you really want to quit the case, huh?”

“You know that isn’t true,” she contradicted him swiftly. “But I’m not going to butt in where I’m not wanted, unless it’s for a person’s own good.”

“You know how much I value your help.”

“All right, then. But why didn’t you tell me about the letter you found in the Stait house?”

The Inspector was very uncomfortable. “Why ... I was going to tell you about that. A little later.”

“You were? Oscar Piper, you wanted to demonstrate your masculine superiority, that’s all. You thought I was getting too sure of myself after my luck in the last case we did together, and so you handed yourself a

handicap. You held back some evidence so that I wouldn't beat you too badly!"

"But Hildegarde ..."

"Yes, and you got up early this morning to try and beat me to a few facts over here, didn't you?"

"But Hildegarde, you did the same thing."

"Never mind. Oscar Piper, it's all or nothing. Maybe you don't like to have the other officers see you tagging around with a woman all the time. All right, we'll work separately. And we'll see which one of us gets to the truth of this mess first. I'll bet you—I'll bet you a week's salary, mine against yours, that I find out who killed Laurie Stait before you do. You can have all the power of the police department, and I'll work alone, and I'll show you what your masculine superiority is worth!"

Miss Withers was raging, and the Inspector had bitten through his cigar. "All right, you're on with that bet," he said. "And what's more, I'll give you a better break than that. I'll tell you every concrete fact I establish and give you the advantage of everything that the police have or can get on the case. And you don't have to tell me anything you don't wish to. That makes it even, and we'll just prove once and for all how far an amateur can get against a trained operative."

"Fair enough." They shook hands. "And now, what about that letter?" Piper told her.

Miss Withers was silent while the taxi coursed southward a couple of blocks. "So this girl Dana was engaged to Lew and in love with Laurie? Lew stayed in New York and Laurie went out to a ranch, and then he came back and got himself murdered! I'm trying to fit it all together."

"Not much fitting to do," grunted the Inspector. "Brothers have killed brothers before over a girl."

Miss Withers shook her head. "It doesn't fit. Besides, Lew Stait had an alibi. He was at home when the thing happened."

The Inspector laughed bitterly. "In the first place, we don't know what happened. A body in the street with a rope around its neck. But that's nothing. How did it get out of the car and into the street? Who threw the noose? Why didn't anybody see it? Besides, what is Lew's alibi worth? The maid was upstairs, and she couldn't swear that he didn't go out when she was taking the old mummy her tea in the attic rooms, or when she was checking the laundry. Besides, by the looks of the situation when we came,

little Gretchen is sweet on Mister Lew anyway. So why shouldn't she lie to protect him?"

"But there's another reason why it isn't as simple as that," Miss Withers thought aloud. "This business in the Garden ..."

"You mean the girl's fainting when I told her Laurie Stait was dead?"

Miss Withers shook her head again. "I do not. I mean the girl's fainting when she heard that Laurie Stait had died from being strangled with a lariat! There's a difference, you remember. She took your first sentence calmly enough. It was the second that knocked her over."

"You mean, you think she was involved with Laurie last summer when he was out at the dude ranch, and that she had something to do with the fact that he was murdered?"

"I don't know. One thing just occurred to me. Is there any way of finding out if the rodeo had a parade last night on Fifth Avenue, or if they were moving horses through the streets?"

"That's easy. I happen to know that no permit for a parade was granted them, and that none would be. Besides, the thing is impossible at the rush hour. No, there was no parade."

"So Laurie Stait was not murdered by a lasso in the hands of a cowboy. Well, I just wanted to know. I've seen movies of that sort of thing."

"Well, this isn't a movie, nor was the end of that rope held by any man on horseback. It would have been seen; besides, because a cowboy on horseback would have attracted as much attention as a knight in armor on that Avenue. No, it was a simpler method."

"Out of a window?" Miss Withers polished her glasses. "Somebody might have made a successful cast from a second story window and snagged him. It would have to be an expert with a rope to have that accurate an aim."

"Well, doesn't it strike you as fairly obvious that the town is full, right now, of the smartest experts in fancy roping that all the wild west can offer?"

They rode on in silence. "How's this," offered the Inspector. "Laurie Stait was a handsome chap. Suppose that he went out west because he knew his brother's girl had fallen for him, and he wanted to play fair. Then this Rose Keeley also gets hipped over him, and they fix it up to get married. Only her brother Buck doesn't like the city slicker and forbids it, so she

waits until the rodeo brings them here, and starts seeing Laurie again. And the brother gets wise and knocks the boy off. How's that?"

"Too easy," objected Miss Withers. "Besides, you saw Rose Keeley. Did she strike you as the kind of a girl who would let a brother tell her what to do? More likely she tells him what to do. She looks like the kind of woman who gets what she wants, or knows the reason why."

"Suppose she wanted Laurie Stait ... and he didn't want her?"

"Oscar, I do believe you're improving," Miss Withers congratulated him. "Well, here we are at the abode of justice."

"You'd better come on up," suggested the Inspector.

"But what about our agreement? I was going to keep in the background."

"There's a lot of routine matters that ought to be settled by now," he explained. "There's the report of the auto expert who went over the wrecked Chrysler, and the pictures from the photographer, and so forth. Take a look at them, and then you can go out sleuthing all you like on your own ..."

"I don't think I'll ... oh, yes I will." Miss Withers exercised the ancient prerogative of her sex and changed her mind. For she had noticed a young man going up the flight of stone steps ahead of them, toward the main entrance of the building.

It was a young man she had seen before. In spite of his wearing a nondescript hat and overcoat, she recognized him quite clearly. It was Hubert Stait, the odd little cousin of the dead twin, and he was going somewhere in considerable of a hurry.

That somewhere proved to be the Inspector's own office, or as close to that sanctum sanctorum as was possible with Lieutenant Keller barring the door.

"I tell you, I've got to see the Inspector!" Hubert Stait was demanding as they came down the hall.

"Well, if you turn around you can see him, all right," the Lieutenant informed him dryly. "But as for his seeing you, I can't say."

Miss Withers watched Hubert as he turned to face them. He looked even more like a startled owl than ever, now. His tie had not been tied carefully, and it failed to match his shirt ... or even to harmonize. His voice showed evidence of a considerable amount of excitement.

"May I see you alone, Inspector?"

“Certainly.” Inspector Piper led the way to the inner door. As he held it open for Hubert Stait, his eyes sought Miss Withers’ for a second, and then dropped meaningfully toward a low padded chair. “Will you wait *there*, Hildegarde?”

She was vaguely annoyed, having hoped to hear the inside of this, whatever it was. But she dropped obediently into the padded chair.

Lieutenant Keller came back into the office, and busied himself at some file cases near the window. For a few minutes Miss Withers amused herself by trying to figure out where the murderer could have stood to cast a noose over the head of a man in an open roadster on Fifth Avenue.

In the car? That wasn’t likely. He would have had to jump out, which wasn’t easy, and then brace himself with the rope in his hands. No, that was out.

From a window of one of the buildings? That was more likely, but though, as the Inspector had pointed out, a cowboy trained in the use of a lariat might have made the cast of the rope, yet how would a stranger in town have ingress to a front office on the Avenue, and how would he know Laurie Stait was driving past at that hour? Miss Withers knew that there was a saying that if you wait on the corner of Forty-second Street at Fifth Avenue long enough, you will meet everyone you ever knew. She had always doubted the usefulness of meeting everyone she’d ever known, and besides, there wasn’t a high degree of probability that one of the cowboys had taken up such a vigil. Much less Rose Keeley, who didn’t appear a highly patient person.

It was from such reveries that Miss Withers was rudely jerked forth when she realized that there was a low buzzing somewhere close by. It annoyed her, and she looked over the desk top to see what it was.

The buzzing came in starts and stops, and gradually as her ears became accustomed to it she made out that she was listening to the human voice ... to Inspector Piper’s voice, dim and far away. But it did not come through the door.

Lieutenant Keller was watching her. “Top drawer to the left,” he suggested. She opened it, and found a radio headset of earphones, as well as a pad of paper and a dozen sharpened pencils.

The Lieutenant nodded encouragingly. She put on the headset, and then suddenly her pencil started flying across the pad in a weird line of hieroglyphics which neither Mr. Pitman nor Mr. Gregg would have owned.

But her own brand of shorthand had come in handily before, and it was handy now.

With the headset over her ears, she could hear every word that was spoken in the next room. The Inspector was talking, crisply and clearly.

“... you’ll have to explain the reason,” he was finishing. “It’s not the custom for us to furnish an officer as a body guard in a case of this kind. What are you afraid of? As it happens, there was an officer in the hall last night, but I’m taking him off today. Why do you want a body guard?”

“Because there’s *danger* in that house,” broke in Hubert Stait, his voice raised above its usual cautious calm. “I’m entitled to police protection, aren’t I?”

“My dear young man, the murder is already committed. Laurie Stait is dead. It’s unlikely ...”

“It is not unlikely that something else will happen. I know! Inspector, I tell you that nobody’s life is safe if you don’t keep a guard in our house at night. That’s like the police. You come around and ask questions and make life miserable for the innocent bystanders, but when a person knows that there is the greatest danger you *pooh-pooh* it until it’s too late. Laurie is dead, though he might not be if he’d come to the police when he started to be worried over whatever it was. We all knew he was in trouble, worse trouble than usual. All week he’d been staying home and he wouldn’t let anyone else answer the phone ... though he seemed to dread it. But he is dead ... and I’m not going to be the next one.”

“Why should anyone want to murder you?”

“I don’t know, I tell you! But I think somebody is trying to wipe out every male member of our family. Laurie was first, he’s the eldest. But why do you think it’s going to stop there?”

“Why not? Any reason why you think all the men in the family are doomed ? Who are they, by the way—besides the late Laurie Stait, and Lew, and yourself?”

There was a moment’s silence, and Miss Withers heard the creak of the Inspector’s easy chair.

Then Hubert’s careful voice came over the wire. “The next in line would be Charley, that’s Charles Waverly, the New York attorney. He’s a fourth cousin or something to the twins, while I’m a first cousin. The next relatives are farther removed, both by blood and by actual distance. They’re out in Kansas or somewhere.”

“I see. And why would anyone start to knock off the whole family? Is there a large estate?”

“I ... I don't think so. Gran always is preaching economy, although there's money enough to keep things running. Gran never entertains, you know, and two servants keep the place. The house itself ought to be worth a good deal.”

“Doesn't look like motive for murder to me,” said the Inspector. “Even a house on Riverside Drive isn't worth more than twenty or thirty thousand in these times. Nobody would start wholesale murder for that.”

“Then why was Laurie killed?”

“We'll have an answer for that question one of these days,” said Inspector Piper slowly. “It may be an answer that certain people don't like, but it will be the right one. No, Mr. Hubert Stait, I'm afraid I'll have to refuse your request to have an officer play wet-nurse for you unless you can give me a better reason than this fantastic story of a deeplaid plot ...”

“Then I'll give you a better reason than that, Inspector.” Hubert's voice cracked. “Last night someone tried to kill me!”

X

Or Forever Hold His Peace

THERE WAS A SILENCE during which Miss Withers might have counted ten. Then the Inspector's voice rose, raspingly.

"Someone what?"

"Yes, sir. That's why I'm down here. I'll begin at the beginning. I couldn't sleep last night, after all that had happened. After you and your lady friend went away I lay in my bed, listening to that parrot of Gran's chattering up on the floor above. The house seemed to be full of noises. My room as you know is on the front of the house, and I lay there in bed and waited for the first signs of daylight to show on the Jersey shore across the river. Then I heard somebody coming stealthily along the hall ..."

"Heavy or light tread? Sound like a man or a woman?"

There was a little hesitation. "Honestly, I can't say, Inspector. It was very light and cautious, just a *hush-hush* sound along the carpet. That was what made me suspicious. The sounds stopped just outside my door."

"Which was locked?"

"Yes, sir. The locks in that house are all old-fashioned, however, and they can be opened with any skeleton key. So I'd pushed a chair against the knob on the inside. Well, I lay there for what must have been fifteen minutes, waiting for whatever it was to go on past. But it didn't. I tried to keep myself from dozing off, and then something happened that will keep me from dozing off for a week. I swear that I hadn't heard a key turn in the lock, nor a squeak from the chair back that was against the door. But as I lay there, staring into the darkness, I saw that the door was ajar, perhaps eight inches. My chair back didn't fit tightly enough under the knob, I guess. Anyway, I could see a dim panel of light which must have come from the lamp at the head of the stairs."

"But there was the Sergeant down in the lower hall! Why didn't you call out to him?"

"You forget, Inspector. I didn't know he was there. You sent me to my room, and you said nothing about leaving an operative on duty. I thought

that I was the only man in the house, except for Lew.”

“Oh, yes, of course. So what did you do?”

“I sat on the edge of the bed and said, Who’s there?’ There wasn’t any answer. I thought I saw something in the air, like a bat flying, but then I lost it. And then I saw that the door had closed again. I got up and moved a bureau in front of it. Then I came back to bed and found the pillow pinned against the headboard of the bed with ... this!”

There was a metallic rattle as something was laid on the Inspector’s desk. Miss Withers realized for the first time the disadvantages of her listening post. Television would have helped. Because she was curious to know what it was had pinned the pillow of Hubert Stait to the headboard of his bed.

“Very nice,” came the Inspector’s voice. “A nasty little toadsticker, this. Ever see it before you saw it sticking through your pillow?”

“I ... I don’t like to say!”

“Come, come. You’ll have to answer. Where did you see it before?”

“It was part of the camping outfit that Laurie took west with him last summer. He was figuring on making an expedition into the Tetons alone with a frying pan and a book and a dog that he picked up out there, he wrote us. I don’t know whether he ever did or not.”

“Did he bring this knife back with him?”

“I think so ... though I don’t remember seeing it after he returned.”

“Very well. Now Hubert, tell me one thing more. Have you any idea who it was who stood outside your door and tossed cold steel at you last night?”

“I ... no, sir.”

“Not even a suspicion?”

“No, sir.”

“Man or woman?”

“I’m not sure ... but I think it must have been a man. To throw that hard.”

“You say the only other man in the house, besides the Sergeant, was your cousin Lew?”

“Yes sir.”

“Do you think it was Lew who threw that knife at you?”

“Don’t make me answer that, Inspector. I don’t know. I just want to be protected, that’s all.”

“Against Lew Stait?”

“Well ... yes.”

“Tell me, do you think your cousin Lew was responsible, then, for what happened to Laurie?”

“I don’t know, Inspector. He’d kill me if he knew ... that I’m talking to you. They’ve always called Lew the good twin, and Laurie the bad one. It should have been the other way around. Laurie was open and free in what he did, but Lew was the sanctimonious one, always playing up to Gran and then getting into scrapes. Everybody but Gran and Aunt Abbie knew about Lew and the maid. But if she’d seen it with her own eyes Gran would have said it was Laurie. Laurie always has taken the blame for everything bad Lew did. If Lew comes in drunk, it’s Laurie. If Lew gets in a fight in a Harlem brothel, it’s Laurie. They always stood up for each other, you see. When they were in school they used to share the work, each studying what was easiest for him and then reciting for whichever name was called. You see, no teacher could tell them apart. Laurie used to write Lew’s English and history exams, while Lew did the math for both of them. Their writing was enough alike so nobody could be sure.”

“Hmmm. So Laurie, you say, was the scapegoat. And he stood for it?”

“Always. You see, they don’t think as two persons, entirely. I mean they didn’t. They always agreed, for instance, on what they were going to wear that day ... always the same thing. Perhaps Laurie resented the burden of bearing Lew’s sins, but he never showed it.”

“Very good.” Miss Withers heard the sound of the Inspector’s chair being pushed back. “I’ll consider what you say, young man.”

“I tell you, my life—nobody’s life—is safe in that house unless you do something, Inspector.”

“I’ll do something, never fear.” The Inspector’s voice faded as he moved away from the concealed microphone. “Good morning.”

Then the knob of the inner office door turned noisily, giving Miss Withers a second or two in which she might slip off the headphones and close the drawer. She was fixing her hat when the Inspector ushered Hubert Stait through the office again and out toward the hall.

Then Piper came over to where she was sitting. “There’s a badly scared young man, or I’m no judge,” he said.

“Excited, anyway,” Miss Withers agreed. “I could tell that much by his voice. He’s a strange person, very. I got everything but the beginning,

Oscar. What did he want you to do?"

"He asked permission to get away, out of town or at least out of the Stait house. And I told him again, as I did last night, that there wasn't a chance. Because every member of that household and every friend and relative of the dead man is a suspect until we get a little farther with the case. He acted as if my decision was no surprise to him, and then he wanted me to station a plain-clothes man to guard him ... you heard that. He's a nervous, over-intellectual type, and he's scared silly of his cousin. Under the circumstances I don't blame him, though we haven't got evidence enough to make an arrest."

"May I see that knife?" Miss Withers drew back as the Inspector whipped from his pocket nine inches of gleaming steel, with a heavy handle of polished horn. It was a wicked-looking thing, more like a bayonet than a hunting knife.

"So that knife belonged to the dead man, eh?" Miss Withers hefted it. "Looks like the knives they throw in vaudeville."

The Inspector nodded. "That's what it is. Evidently Laurie Stait liked to practice tossing this little toy. Evidently his brother—or somebody—also had the habit. You see, it's balanced to whirl end over end so that the thrower can gauge the number of revolutions to impinge the blade wherever he takes a fancy."

"I see." Miss Withers fingered the glittering thing casually. "Oscar, any objection to my keeping this knife overnight? Unless of course you want to photograph it for fingerprints."

"There aren't any," she was told. "I dusted it with powder in my office, and there wasn't a single print. Hubert picked it up with a handkerchief, being a sensible young man for all his Phi Beta Kappa key, and the thrower evidently handled it the same way. But why do you want it?"

"I just want it, that's all."

"Going to put it under your pillow and then dream the name of the person who threw it?" The Inspector permitted himself a mild smile.

"Something like that. You can have it tomorrow, Oscar. By the way, are you going to do what Hubert asked you to, and post a man in the Stait house?"

"I don't know. Maybe it would be the wise thing. I'd hate to see what the papers would say if there was another member of that family bumped off. Wait a minute—"

The telephone on the Inspector's desk was buzzing merrily, and he moved to answer it himself. Miss Withers followed him into the inner office. He shouted hello into the mouthpiece.

"Sergeant Taylor reporting sir, from the Stait house. It's nine o'clock, and I'm leaving as per orders, sir."

"All right, Sergeant. Anything happen in the night?"

"Not a thing, sir. I stayed there at the foot of the stairs, and nothing happened except the milkman's arrival. A little while ago Mr. Hubert Stait went out, in a hurry."

"Yes, I know about that. Oh, by the way, Sergeant. What time did Lew Stait get back from identifying his brother at the Morgue?"

"Get back? But ... but Inspector, nobody came in the house at all, I tell you! I was right at the front door, and there's no back stairs, so anybody coming in the back way would have had to pass by me to get upstairs. I didn't see hide nor hair of Lew Stait. I thought he'd come in before you left, and that he was safe in his bed."

"Good lord, man! Then Lew Stait has made his getaway!" The Inspector looked up at Miss Withers. "I meant to have somebody tail him, but I didn't because I took it for granted that the boys who drove him down to the Morgue would bring him back home. And he just walked out and disappeared!"

He turned to the phone again. "Hello, Sergeant? I suppose you're anxious to get some shut-eye, so you can go home ... wait a minute ..."

Miss Withers whispered a suggestion and the Inspector nodded. "Oh, before you go off duty, Sergeant, I want you to do something for me. Go upstairs to the front room on the third floor and have a look at the pillows. That's all ... and phone me back here at Headquarters."

He put down the phone. "Damn the luck! So Lew Stait has slipped out of our fingers, huh? Right when we were beginning to get something on him. Well, he won't get far. We'll have him dragged back, if he took a train or a boat or even went by air. Even if he's out of our jurisdiction there's no trouble getting extradition for murder ..."

"It's not so easy to manage it in all cases," Miss Withers put forward dryly. "Didn't Hubert say something about all men of the Stait family being marked for death? How is the extradition from the next world, Oscar?"

"You mean—you think he's been killed?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "If it could happen to one twin it could happen to the other. They always shared share and share alike, you know."

Inspector Piper nodded, heavily. "But that screws everything up. If Lew Stait wasn't in that house last night, and I'm pretty sure that Taylor is telling the truth when he says Lew wasn't, then who opened the door of Hubert's room and tossed the cutlery at him? He didn't like to say so, but he was sure it was Lew."

Miss Withers nodded. "Have you considered this, Oscar? Hubert is a nervous, over-intellectual type. Suppose he got it into his head that Lew was after him, not knowing that Lew was out of the house all night, and then imagined the whole thing?"

"Imagined the knife, too?"

"He might have picked that up somewhere, to make his delusion seem real. Or perhaps he is just frightened half to death and trying to get something which will impel you to protect him with a detective in the house. A sort of hysteria, perhaps."

"For that matter, somebody might have thrown that knife besides Lew," Piper pointed out. "The old lady, or that tough Dutch cook ..." He slapped his knee. "That's it. The cook was used to knives, in the kitchen."

"She peeled potatoes with them, certainly. But did you ever see a cook peel a potato by *throwing* knives at it?" Miss Withers shook her head.

"Oscar Piper, there's something here we don't see."

"There's damn little that we do see," said the Inspector, trying vainly to relight his dead cigar. "But the first thing I'm going to do is to send out the alarm for Lew Stait. Can't you see the newspaper headlines if the other twin has been bumped off?" He reached for the telephone, but even as he lifted the receiver it burst into a shrill ringing.

"Hello, Taylor?"

It was. "Listen, Inspector, I went up and had a look at those pillows the way you asked me."

"Go on, what did you find?"

"Well, the one on the left had a slit, like a razor cut, about three quarters of an inch long, in both back and front of the linen slip and the pillow itself. And there was a nick in the headboard of the bed, too."

The Inspector nodded. "Good, Taylor. Now you can get home. What's that?"

He listened for a moment, and his mouth dropped open with astonishment. "You say it happened when you were upstairs? Well, I'll be ..."

"What is it, for heaven's sake?" Miss Withers leaned towards him, across the desk. "Tell me, Oscar! Is Lew Stait dead?"

He put down the phone slowly, and looked up at her. "Not exactly, Hildegard."

"What do you mean, not exactly?"

"He's married," said the Inspector. "Right at this moment he's standing in the front hall of the Stait house, according to the Sergeant, and making the announcement to the family. The girl is with him—they just got back from Greenwich, Connecticut. The girl is—"

"Dana Waverly, of course," interrupted Miss Withers. "Oscar, isn't there a statute in this state which prevents a wife from taking the witness stand against her husband?"

Inspector Piper nodded his head, and his pugnacious lower lip thrust itself forward.

XI

'Twas Brillig

THE INSPECTOR REACHED FOR his hat and overcoat. "Where are you rushing to?" Miss Withers wanted to know. "Going up to Riverside Drive to give the young couple your blessing?"

"I am not." He stopped beside the file case to take down a bound copy of the latest Manhattan telephone book. "Let's see ... U—V—W ... here we are. Waverly, B. O.—perfumer ... Waverly, Dr. Bruce ... Waverly, Charles M.—attorney, 555 Enterprise Trust Building—Lackawanna 4-4333 ... hmmm ... here we are. Waverly, Miss Dana E., 23 Minetta Lane—Spring something or other ..."

He looked up. "I'm off for 23 Minetta Lane," he announced. "Coming, Hildegard?"

She stared at him without answering.

"Coming?"

She shook her head. "Wait a minute, Oscar. What was the name you read aloud just before you found Dana Waverly's?"

"You mean Charles M. Waverly, the attorney? I know what you're thinking. Yes, it's undoubtedly the family lawyer old Mrs. Stait was talking about ... and the next in line of the Stait men. You might make a note of the address. I'll need to see him."

"I did make a note of the address. Enterprise Trust Building, number 555. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Mean anything? What should it mean ... oh, Great Scott! Wasn't it the lobby of the Enterprise Trust Building where Laurie Stait's body was carried by that dumb traffic cop Doody?"

"It was. Still going down to Minetta Lane, Oscar?"

"More than ever," he told her. "If there isn't some connection between Charles Waverly the lawyer and Dana Waverly the new Mrs. Lew Stait I'll eat my badge, and my buttons too. Lieutenant, phone Swarthout and have him meet me downstairs in a hack. Come on, Hildegard."

"I'm not coming," Miss Withers informed him. "I've got other plans. First I'm going to go home and do my setting up exercises, and then I'm going to look in at the Rodeo at Madison Square Garden again. I'd like to meet this Buck Keeley, or at least have a look at him. That ought to be an interesting matinee today, particularly if Rose Keeley feels well enough to perform."

"But I thought ..."

"Never you mind, Oscar Piper. We agreed that we were going to work this case out separately and see which one was right. We might meet this evening and have dinner, if you like. In a sort of armed neutrality, perhaps."

"Right you are. I'll be seeing you."

He was almost at the door when there was the sound of heavy footsteps in the hall outside, and in walked a massive gentleman in blue, with the nightstick and uniform cap of a patrolman in his hand. One eye was puffed and in mourning.

"Dan Kehoe reporting, sor, by permission ..."

"Kehoe? Reporting for what?" The Inspector was in a hurry. "Out with it."

"It's like this, Inspector. There was a killing on my beat last night, sor." Kehoe swallowed with difficulty. "The Stait fellow that was strangled."

"I know that," the Inspector told him. "So you're the dummy who didn't show up all evening, huh? And why not?"

"That's what I come to tell you about, sor. I reported it to the Captain last night at the precinct station when he bawled me out for not being there on duty. He thought nothing of it at the time, but since then I've been wondering if maybe there wasn't some connection, sor. He told me to report it in person."

"Some connection between what?" The Inspector jammed his hat down on his ears. "I'm in a hurry, Kehoe."

"Yes, sor. A connection between the killing of this Stait fellow and the fight I got in. It was at five-thirty o'clock, sor. And I was coming down Forty-fourth Street near the Avenue when I saw a cab pull up in front of the Hotel Senator. Some fellows got out and started to argue with the driver, Inspector. It was about the fare. And I catch a glimpse of them pulling him out from behind the wheel so he'd be the handier for taking a sock at. So I got up to them and I warn them to stop making a nuisance and I ask the

driver if he wants to prefer a charge of disorderly conduct. And just then one of the roughnecks hauls off and gives me this in the eye, Inspector.”

“Well, what did you do? Warn him again?”

“No, sor. I punched him in the jaw. His big hat rolled halfway acrost the street.”

“So he had an opera hat on? A swell, huh? And drunk at that hour, too.”

“No, sor. Not an opry hat. It was one of them ten-gallon hats that Tom Mix wears in the movies. They all of them had hats like that And then another guy jumps me, and a third climbs out of the cab and kicks at my shins, and we mix into it pretty hot and heavy. And just as I’m getting my second wind there comes a little guy in a derby out of the hotel and separates us.”

“What did he do, throw a pail of water on the whole dogfight of you?”

“No, sor. But he seemed to have some control over the cowboys. For that’s what they were. He was the manager, he said. And he explained that they weren’t really used to taxicabs and such, and that they didn’t mean any harm. And he said that if I booked any of the boys on disorderly conduct they’d have to call off the Rodeo, and half the kids in town would be disappointed. So I let ’em go, and he gave me some box seats for the show, and that was all. Nice fellow he was, name of Carrigan. Then I reported back to the station house, and explained to the Captain why I didn’t know about the killing on my own beat, Inspector. Only last night I got to wondering.”

“About what?”

“Well, the boys said that this Stait was killed with a rope, and those cowboys are good with ropes, I’ve seen ’em before. It seemed funny, things happening all at the same time like that.”

“Very good, Kehoe. Now you can stop wondering, and let us do that. If you were involved in an emergency call on your beat, there’s no reason why you need to fear any disrating for missing the killing. You can go.”

The big patrolman turned a blue back. “Oh, Kehoe. You might keep your mouth shut about this.”

“Yes, sor. ‘Sealed-lips Kehoe,’ they calls me.” He saluted, a broad smile on his face and his good eye twinkling. Then he was gone.

Miss Withers wanted to know what the Inspector thought of that. He admitted that he didn’t think much of anything of it.

“If Buck Keeley was one of the cowboys who got in a brush with Kehoe, then he didn’t bump off Laurie Stait, and if he wasn’t, well—what does the brawl mean?”

“You go on down to Minetta Lane and let me worry over what it means,” Miss Withers told him.

But she spent the next couple of hours, as it happened, in an entirely different pursuit—one which would have surprised the Inspector considerably if he could have seen her, though he was not easily surprised.

The Inspector came down the stone steps outside Headquarters, and looked up the street and down for signs of the operative who was supposed to be waiting for him here.

“Hey, Swarthout!”

A ruddy, boyish face presented itself above the spare tire of a waiting Yellow. “Yes, Inspector?”

“Come on, snap out of it!” The driver of the Yellow climbed swiftly behind the wheel, and the Inspector climbed in beside his youngest operative.

The young man offered his chief a cigarette, unsuccessfully. “Didn’t see you coming,” he admitted.

Piper gave the driver the Minetta Lane address. “What were you doing behind this cab when I came down?”

Swarthout looked innocent. “Nothing, Inspector. Nothing but passing the time away.” There was the slightest accent on the word “passing.”

“Oh, yeah? You’re a fine example to the public, Swarthout. The crap-shooting detective, huh? Gambling in public!”

Swarthout took a pair of pink cubes from his pocket and rattled them lovingly. “I don’t mind telling you in confidence, Inspector, that with these dice there isn’t any gambling in it at all. I found ’em on Tony the Wop last week, and they take the chance out of games of chance. By the way, what are we doing down in Greenwich Village, attending a drag?”

Piper grunted. “I want to have a little look at a girl’s apartment down there,” he admitted. “I sent for you because you’re handy with tools, and we may have to break into the place. Besides, you don’t look as much, like a stage dick as most of the boys, and I want to keep this little visit quiet, see?”

“Right, Inspector.” Georgie Swarthout patted his little pocket kit of tools. He was one of the few men attached to Headquarters who had not

risen from the police ranks, but had been taken on during the past spring when a new Commissioner had started a campaign for “higher education” in the cohorts of the city’s defenders. Most of the “college cops” had not lasted as long as the shine of their first brass buttons, but because he looked and acted so much like anything in the world except a detective, this one had made something of a niche for himself. The Inspector disapproved of him and liked him.

“You know, Angel-face, I love the Village less than any other section of this town,” the Inspector confessed as they rolled around a corner. “I’ll never forget a night when we had to call out the reserves. I was a Precinct Captain then. The usual complaints of a noisy party came in, but this wasn’t the usual party. The people in a basement apartment on Bedford Street complained that their ceiling was coming down.

“Well, as it turned out later a crazy poet above them was throwing a lease-breaking party. As a climax some of the boys had kidnapped a milkman’s horse and somehow led it up four steps and into the ground-floor living room. When we got there they’d all ducked out, and all we picked up was a lonesome white horse surrounded by empty gin bottles.”

They had no difficulty in finding the building. It stood out among the tumble-down houses of the Lane like a buyer’s order on a broker’s desk. There were flower boxes outside the front windows, empty now but sure to blossom with red geraniums as soon as April brought the flower hucksters to the street.

In the lobby was a set of push-buttons, with one at the bottom labelled “Supt.—out of order.”

The Inspector ran his thumb down the line of cards in brackets. There it was. “Third floor front—Miss Dana Waverly.” Above the engraved name Waverly had been neatly lettered with a fountain pen the addition “B. Doolittle.”

So Dana Waverly had a roommate, huh? Well, that either simplified or complicated things. Piper knew that there might be difficulties in getting the janitor to let him roam through the place. After all, they had no search warrant with them. He pressed hard on the bell opposite “Third floor front.”

Nothing happened. Evidently not even the roommate was in. There was still a trick or two up his sleeve. Waving Swarthout away from the lock of the inner door, Piper jammed his thumb against every door-bell in the house. There’d be somebody home in one apartment or another. There was.

The inner door clicked alarmingly, and Swarthout caught it, opened it a few inches, and shot the night lock. Then the two of them marched out of the building, allowed time enough for whoever had answered the ring to give up waiting for the unexpected visitor, and then returned. With no hesitation the Inspector led the way through the unlocked door, up the two flights of stairs, and then along the corridor to the third floor front. Nobody was in the hall.

The lock, unfortunately, was of the Yale variety. The Inspector searched the mantel and under the carpet, as a matter of form, but there was no key parked anywhere. "Do your stuff, kid," he ordered.

The young operative became deadly serious as he went over the lock. His hands made a few deft motions, involving the use of a long coiled spring, a screwdriver, and the blade of a knife. Then he placed his shoulder against one side of the door frame, his right foot against the other, and pressed inward.

There was a sharp click, and then the door opened. Swarthout looked at his wrist-watch. "One minute and forty-five seconds," he announced. "I wish the professor who flunked me in Mechanical Engineering could have seen that."

The lock was scarred, but a few turns of a screwdriver tightened it again and made what had happened fairly unnoticeable. The Inspector had a look around the room. This was not, he realized, the typical Greenwich Village apartment.

In the first place, there were a good many comfortable places to sit down. Between the front windows was a large radio-phonograph combination, and against one wall appeared an antique chest of drawers that was out of the ordinary. The floor was covered with gay rag rugs.

The general effect was one of moderate luxury. Small cases scattered here and there held a good many books.

"Quite a library," suggested Swarthout. The Inspector joined him in front of one of the shelves.

"I don't object to books in themselves," said Piper. "But I wish you'd tell me sometime the excuse for all this poetry."

Swarthout held no brief for poetry himself, not having read any since he had waded through a semester of required English Lit. But he felt it necessary to uphold the cause of verse on account of the academic

background for which he was kidded so unmercifully by his fellow detectives.

“Here’s something you’d go for, Inspector.” He drew from the shelf a worn copy of *Alice in Wonderland*. The title page, he noted was inscribed “To Dana from Lew and Laurie, Christmas 1921 ...”

He fanned the pages. “Get a load of this ... ’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe—all mimsy were the borogoves ...”

“Thanks. I’ll stick to Zane Grey and W. Clark Russell for my reading,” Piper told him. “That door there leads to the kitchenette, I see. You hop in and have a look at the place. Sometimes you can learn a lot about people from their kitchens. You might make an inventory of the icebox. I’ll go through the bedroom.”

“Right, Inspector.” The younger man disappeared through the nearer of the two doors in the rear wall of the room, and the Inspector chose the other. Somewhat to his surprise he found himself in a large combined dressing room and bath. This told him nothing except that Dana Waverly or her roommate had used Fracy’s lavender soap, and that a large number of clean towels had been recently hung on the racks.

A door at the farther end of the bath led into the bedroom proper—or improper, if you like. There were too many gimcracks here for the Inspector’s taste. Three ridiculous French dolls watched him gravely from the pillows, and everything seemed covered with taffeta. A single bed, a vanity table, a chest of sweet-smelling cedar, and three chintz chairs made up the furnishings of the room. It was not hard to figure that this was occupied by only one person. Probably Dana Waverly slept here and her roommate used the day bed in the living room, Piper guessed.

He crossed at once to the vanity table, avoiding his own image in the myriad mirrors and bending over the drawers. Here were an unholy number of creams and powders, all of exquisite makes and manufacture. But there were no letters, none of the personal and revelatory material that he desired.

He went on swiftly through the drawers, now and then jabbing his fingers on a hairpin. He wasn’t quite sure what he was looking for anyway, but it was a cinch that he wasn’t finding it.

There were two closets opening into the room. The first contained four dresses of the type known as “useful all-around,” a pair of galoshes, a pair of rubbers, an evening dress of somewhat flighty taffeta trimmed with what the Inspector called “jittery ribbons,” two hats, both well rained-upon, and

on a floor was a strange object which the Inspector realized, upon closer inspection, was a reducing girdle.

There was, strangely enough, no baggage of any kind in the closet or on the shelves.

The next closet was a different story. A whiff of mingled perfume, sachet, and good leather struck the Inspector's delicate nose as he opened the door. The rod was jammed with dresses, light dresses and dark dresses, silks and satins and lace and everything else under the sun. The floor was littered with shoes, and more shoes hung everywhere on the inside of the door.

The shelf held a Boston bag, two overnight bags, and a suitcase ... all empty. This, the Inspector decided, was Dana Waverly's closet ... and the other must be that of Miss "B. Doolittle."

It was then that the Inspector noticed the black leather bag which lay half concealed by a heap of shoes. Someone had been through this closet in a hurry, Piper decided. Unless this young lady believed in putting her belongings away by throwing them up in the air and letting them fall.

The bag was almost empty, or seemed so on first sight. There was a crumpled package of Camels, a leather lighter without any wick in it, seven pennies, and a Geranium lipstick, well past its prime.

The Inspector was about to cast it aside as impertinent to his search when he heard something crackle in the lining. There was another pocket, a narrow compartment, just wide enough for a letter or two.

The white corner of an envelope showed ... an envelope which, when finally held in the Inspector's thumb and finger, showed itself as a little less white than when it had come from the stationers.

For the second time in this case someone had carried an envelope around until it showed signs of wear and tear.

XII

Stale Sidecars

BUT THIS WAS NO letter. There was no address on the envelope, and it was heavily lined and lightly scented. One of Dana's own, the Inspector guessed.

When he had learned everything that was to be learned from the envelope, he lifted the unsealed flap and drew out the contents.

It was a photograph, a postcard size snapshot, amateurishly printed. The subjects were a young man who bore an uncanny resemblance to Lew Stait and a large collie dog still in the gawkins of puppyhood. The young man—it must have been Laurie Stait because of the mountains in the background—was holding a stick high in the air, and the dog was caught in the act of hurling himself after it.

"A nice pup, that," observed the Inspector. Then he reversed the picture. On the other side, in somewhat erratic typescript, was this message

'You asked for a picture of me, Dana darling, so here it is. The dog is Rowdy, and he has adopted me. He belongs to the ranch, but it will be tough to leave him when I come back. Love—Laurie ...'

The Inspector scratched his head. First a letter from Dana to Laurie at the ranch, declaring her love. Then this picture, which evidently Dana Waverly had carried about with her for months, concealed in the envelope. Somehow, this did not fit in with Dana's marrying Lew, even if she had been engaged to him for years. With Laurie dead, did she try to find him in the twin who was so like him, or was there a darker significance?

The Inspector put the photograph back in the envelope, and the envelope into his pocket. No telling what use he could put it to later. It might be revealing to confront Dana Waverly—Dana Stait now—with it.

The Inspector gave a look around the bedroom. Nothing more here, at any rate. For that matter, there was no sign that anyone had slept here in this apartment last night, although he realized that an efficient maid could have made it look that way. The fresh towels in the bathroom gave evidence of some sort of maid service. They were folded too neatly, and hung too

beautifully—and uselessly—on the racks to have been put there by the two tenants of the place.

Inspector Piper came back into the living room and proceeded to ignite a cigar with leisurely puffs at the flame of a table lighter in the shape of a silver cannon ball.

At that moment the hall door opened quickly and a large tan suitcase entered, followed by a somewhat largish girl in a Eugenie hat and a coonskin coat.

As her eyes met the Inspector's she dropped the tan suitcase, and her mouth opened like the gaping rent of an earthquake, displaying a great deal of teeth.

The scream, which was meant to be something notable in the way of noise, "died a-borning" as Miss Withers would have said. The Inspector beat her to it with a swift "How do you do, Miss Doolittle!"

"I—I'm Bertha Doolittle. But what are you-all doing here? Where's Dana? How did you know my name?"

"It is the business of the police to know everything," the Inspector told her. At the same moment he displayed his shield.

Well, he had to think quickly. He had no more business in the apartment than a sneak thief, and he knew it.

Miss Doolittle had covered all of her teeth except the two front incisors, which glittered with an unpleasant whiteness at the Inspector.

"Your apartment, young lady," he said swiftly, "your apartment has been er—burgled. Fortunately, nothing of value seems to be missing." He pointed out to her the faint scratches on the door jamb which Georgie Swarthout's tools had made.

"We were just having a look around," the Inspector explained. "It seems that the prowlers were frightened away before they could do any damage."

Miss Doolittle did not seem entirely satisfied with his explanation. "But where's Dana? She was heah when I left yesterday morning to spend the week with some kinfolks of mine on Long Island ... tell me, did anything happen to Dana?"

"Yes and no," said the Inspector. "Tell me, what brought you back so soon, Miss Doolittle, if you intended to stay away a week?"

The girl opened her purse and took out a clipping. From where he stood the Inspector could make out the usual headlines. It was the story of

the murder of Laurie Stait on the previous evening. “Strangler Still at Large” declared the headline.

“And just why did that clipping bring you back?”

“You-all just don’t understand,” declared Miss Doolittle in a Dixie accent that struck the Inspector as being laid on with a trowel. “Dana is ma roommate, and she’s such a sweet child she needs somebody to take care of her. And a dreadful thing like this happenin’ to her! Why, *Laurie*—not Lew—Stait was the man she loved, though she was engaged to his brother. The families arranged that, you know. His grandmother and Dana’s brother Charley, a no-good if I ever saw one. He’s just white trash, that’s all, even if he is Dana’s brother. They thought a good deal of each other, though. I expect that’s where Dana is right now, she’s with Charley ...”

The Inspector nodded as if all this did not interest him vitally. “So Dana Waverly loved Laurie Stait, huh?”

“Oh, yes, suh. But she didn’t love Lew. Those twins were as like as two peas, but after she got to know ’em both she loved Laurie. All the family were down on him, and I’ll bet you that they’re glad he’s daid. But all the same, he was the best of the two.”

“I see. Did Dana break her engagement to Lew Stait?”

“I don’ think so. No, I know she didn’t. But she tol’ me when I went away yesterday morning that by the time I got back she’d have some news for me. Lew was comin’ to dinner last night. I think she meant that after dinner she was going to muster up her courage and tell him that it was just no use waitin’ around. She hated to give back that diamond, too. Such a beauty that ring was!”

Suddenly the girl was galvanized into action. “I wonder if she did give it back! Or maybe the sneak-thieves got it when they broke in here. Wait a minute!”

She ran toward the bedroom, the Inspector close behind. What had happened to Swarthout he could not guess, but the boy was not in evidence. Probably he had caught a flash of the teeth, and decided to stay out of it.

Miss Doolittle was down on the floor in Dana Waverly’s closet. “She never wears the ring, you know. Except when she sees Lew, and that’s been getting less and less often lately. We’ve got a little hiding place—”

As she spoke she put her hand on a silver slipper slightly more battered than the rest. Her fingers seized upon a wad of tissue paper jammed into the toe. Inside the toe was a string of near-pearls, a class ring marked,

“Savannah High School 1922,” and a small blue box. Inside the box was a diamond of moderate size and more than moderate perfection, glittering and un-flawed.

“They *didn’t* find it,” said Bertha Doolittle with a certain satisfaction. “It was my idea that we hide our jewelry this way. Nobody would think of looking here.”

“Quite right,” agreed the Inspector. “All the same, it’s strange that the ring is here now. Particularly since Lew Stait gave it, as you say, to Dana Waverly some time ago. It’s strange, don’t you think, that she didn’t wear it to be married in?”

The teeth came out again, and the Dixie accent went out of her speech.

“Wha-a-a-a-a-t ? Dana married?”

“This morning, in Greenwich,” Piper said quietly. “To Lew Stait. Very romantic, what? An elopement and all that sort of thing—special license and so forth. And with Laurie Stait, the man you say she loved, not yet thoroughly chilled out down on his marble slab.”

Bertha Doolittle sat down in one of the chintz chairs, hard. “I don’t believe it,” she insisted.

“Why not?”

“Roommates get to know each other pretty well. Dana used to tell me everything and I told her everything. And I tell you, I know that she didn’t have the slightest idea of ever marrying Lew Stait as long as she lived. She loved Laurie and he loved her, and I guess I ought to know. I’ve gone out to enough movies so they could be alone here together.” There was a shade of bitterness in Miss Doolittle’s voice at this point. The Inspector guessed that Bertha’s trips to the movies had not been entirely her own idea.

“Charley Waverly wanted his sister to marry Lew Stait, and so did Lew’s grandmother. But I tell you this right now, if Dana married Lew this morning she did it at the point of a gun! She didn’t love him.”

“There’s other reasons for marrying than love,” the Inspector observed. “But right now I can’t think of any reason for leaving off your engagement ring when you are married. It’s supposed to be bad luck or something, isn’t it?”

Bertha Doolittle was of the opinion that he was right. “Maybe she forgot it,” she suggested. “No, Dana wouldn’t forget it. She’s not like that.” She shook her head again.

“Mister Policeman, I tell you this right now. I’ll never believe that Dana Waverly married a poor white trash like Lew Stait, not if she tells me so herself. Unless she was drunk or drugged. Why, it was only last week that she heard indirectly about Lew’s being seen kissing the maid up at his home. Charley Waverly tried to make light of it, and Cousin Hubert—he’s a nice chap, but very deep—Cousin Hubert told Dana that it must have been a mistake, and Laurie instead of Lew that somebody saw. Which made it all the worse, you see, because she really didn’t care a hang what foolishness Lew was up to, but she did love Laurie.”

“Tell me this,” said the Inspector. “Were Lew and Laurie really so much alike?”

“Alike? I never could tell which was which, even when I saw them together!”

“But Dana, could she tell them apart?”

Bertha Doolittle was thoughtful. “If anybody could, Dana could,” she said slowly. “They looked awfully alike, and they acted alike on the surface. But in spite of the great closeness between them, they were absolutely different underneath. What they thought, I mean. Lew was gay and loud and always taking what he wanted, and Laurie was shy and willing to take the blame for most of the things that Lew did. He was like that.”

“I see.” The Inspector tossed his cigar out of the open window into the flower box. “Well, Miss Doolittle, you’ve been a great help. I’m glad that nothing is missing in the apartment.”

At that moment there was a tremendous crash in the kitchenette. Bertha Doolittle seized a pair of nail scissors and charged through the door. “There’s the sneak-thief now. Come on, policeman, don’t let him get away!”

The Inspector came on, quickly enough to save young Swarthout from complete annihilation. He explained that this was one of his assistants.

“Well, I’d like to know what he’s been doing in the kitchenette all this time,” insisted Bertha Doolittle belligerently.

The Inspector nodded. “I’m inclined to see your point of view. I’ve been too busy chatting with you to notice the passage of time, but now that you bring it up, I too wonder what he’s been doing.” He faced the “college cop” inquiringly. Swarthout stood half sheltered by the swinging door of the kitchenette, ready to duck out of range if Bertha showed any signs of opening fire with the scissors.

“By the way, Georgie, what in hell have you been doing there in that kitchenette for half an hour?”

With an air of terribly injured dignity, Georgie Swarthout produced a notebook. “Inspector, you yourself told me to make an inventory of the contents of the ice-box. You said—”

“Never mind what I said.” The Inspector took the notebook impatiently. “I still don’t see why it took you this long ...”

His voice died away, and his lower lip slid forward alarmingly. This was the inventory that met his eye,—begun in Swarthout’s neat script ...

One quart of milk, unopened
Two avocado pear salads, with dressing, untouched
Two cup custards with strawberries
Two baked potatoes (cold)
One pound of butter, with two butter balls beside it
Four lamb chops, uncooked
One shaker full of cocktails ...

As an afterthought, the words “sidecars—stale” appeared after the last item. An addition had been made to the line—the word “three-quarters” inserted neatly after *shaker* ... and before *full*.

Evidently the urge for absolute scientific accuracy had smitten the operative, for the word *three-quarters* had itself been struck out, and *half* written in above it, in a script that was no longer neat, but somewhat wavering.

Across the bottom of the page, in letters half an inch high, wobbly as the trail of a seasick serpent, appeared the final notation—“*not so very stale* ...”

XIII

Gray Goose Feathers

IT WAS ALMOST TWO-THIRTY that afternoon when Miss Withers stopped her experiment for the time being, and hurriedly snatched up her overcoat and hat. She had been so engrossed in what she had been doing, or trying to do, that she had forgotten the passage of time, and leaving the apartment on West 76th Street she hailed the first southbound taxi-cab which came along. The apartment could stay as it was until she got back, and if the two other teachers who shared it with her didn't like the looks of it now, they could straighten up for themselves. She had bigger plans afoot, plans which necessitated the opera glasses which she gripped firmly in her hand.

For the second time that day she strode in at the main entrance of Madison Square Garden. The same newspapers blared their headlines at her, reworded from the forenoon editions but still announcing that the strangler was "at large." Indeed, the *American* went so far as to suggest that "STRANGLER TERRORIZES CITY" which seemed to Miss Withers something of an overstatement. Hubert Stait seemed about the only person terrorized so far.

The two cats still hovered aimlessly about the door of the little Coffee Potte, but they were spending more time and energy dodging the footsteps of the crowd of passers-by than had been required of them that morning. The ticket kiosk in the center of the foyer was open now, and there was a line before it Miss Withers made no effort to get in on the weight of her official connection, whatever that might be, but put down her dollar-fifty for a box seat, and passed through the big doors that a janitor had left on the latch that morning. She was relieved of half her ticket and sent around the bowl to a distant aisle.

The Garden was about half full of spectators, a good matinee crowd in this year of A. D.—Awful Depression, as the Inspector called it.

Directly across the circus-like area of tanbark Miss Withers could see a line of high, boarded pens. Around the gateways of these pens a number of young men were moving busily. Most of them wore large Stetson hats, of

the type known as two-gallon, handkerchiefs around their necks, and each displayed trousers strangely fabricated of sheepskin with the wool left on and the seat left out.

Suddenly loudspeakers all over the vast auditorium announced the fact that the next event on the program would be an exhibition of fancy shooting ... “executed, Ladeez an’ Gemmun, by Mr. Laramie White with the assistance of the brave and fearless Miss Rose Keeley I thank you ...”

It was the voice of the manager, Carrigan, Miss Withers realized as she saw him step away from a microphone located near the north barrier. He had replaced his derby with one of the inevitable Stetsons, she noticed. And then two huskies came running out with the dark screen background which she and the Inspector had noticed that morning, setting it up carefully under the flood-lights and bracing the back so that it couldn’t tip over under the shock of the punishment it was about to take.

The two men ran back toward the barrier, and at the same moment a door in one of the high board pens opened, and a girl rode out on a white horse.

The crowd demonstrated its approval by a smattering of applause. She was dressed all in silver-white, from the wide-brimmed hat to the high-heeled boots. Her low-bosomed shirt was of white satin, worked with designs in blue. A white leather belt, dotted with extra cartridges and weighted with a blue and gold-worked holster from which a pearl-handled gun protruded, held up her white silk trousers and the snow-white chaps which covered most of them.

The big white horse came out with its head held high, prancing and mincing, and lifting its feet high above the tanbark at every step. As the applause died away, the girl lifted her Stetson, displaying a mass of light blonde hair, and bowed to her public.

It was Rose Keeley, sure enough. But Miss Withers hardly recognized her. The daring costume had changed her—but more than that, the girl’s face seemed strangely paler than it had looked that morning. It might have been the dead white of her dress, but all the same Miss Withers started wondering. It was her business to wonder.

The white horse took up his stand, as if he, at least, knew his business, directly in front of the background drop, and stood steady as a rock. Rose Keeley, in the saddle, brought out a cigarette, displayed it to the crowd, and struck a match.

Only Miss Withers, because of the powerful glasses before her eyes, and the word of argument which she had overheard that morning, distinguished the fact that Rose Keeley did not draw that cigarette from the pack which she held in her other hand, but slipped it out of her palm as if it were thin and breakable glass.

Only Miss Withers noticed that the business of lighting it was a clever fake, and that no smoke came from the girl's pale lips.

Rose Keeley raised her hand, and the crowd was silent. Then suddenly one of the gates across the area was opened, and there danced into the ring a fat little red and white horse whose colors seemed to have been put on by the accidental crash of a painter's ladder. He bucked once or twice, as if to reassure himself that his rider was able to stick on in all kinds of weather, and then suddenly bunched himself up and set out down the tanbark at a full gallop.

The rider, a lean and lanky young man, gripped the reins loosely, and around his right forefinger he spun a heavy Colt.

The little red and white horse ran as if he had a personal grudge against the ground which bumped his heels—all the same his gait steadied as he passed the white horse and rider at a range of some hundred feet.

The Colt spat noisily in the hand of the lanky young man. But Miss Withers had her glasses trained on the blonde Valkyrie who waited, like a silver statue. Therefore she saw the short jerk of the girl's other arm which, at the end of the connecting thread which Miss Withers could only guess must have been there, tore the largest part of the dummy cigarette from between her pale lips.

The bit of white paper fluttered to the ground, and Rose Keeley leaped down from her steed and displayed the fraction of an inch of butt which remained.

The crowd roared its approval, whether of the stunt itself or of the somewhat voluptuous figure displayed Miss Withers could only guess. Rose Keeley ran a good bit to bosom and hips, and the tight silk shirt and the somewhat sketchy chaps did not bury her light under a bushel.

Laramie White was standing beside her, his Stetson waving in the air. Miss Withers turned the glasses on him, and saw that he had replaced the plaster over his eye with a narrow bit of flesh-tint adhesive tape. She also saw something else.

As the two turned to each other, on their second bow, and shook hands, Miss Withers noticed to her astonishment an interchange of looks between them which, in her own words, was enough to blister an andiron.

There was hearty dislike in Laramie's eyes, and something more that Miss Withers could not understand. But it needed no mind-reader to see what Rose Keeley thought of her partner. If he had been a particularly noxious rattlesnake she could not have flashed contempt, hatred, and disgust any more clearly ... for that second. Then they faced the crowd again, and Rose Keeley's lips were curved in a wooden smile.

The number was continued with Laramie's blazing away at some colored glass balls which the girl tossed in a continuous parabola before the bullet-proof screen, and here the cowboy's shooting must have been better, for he managed to explode four out of five of them.

But Miss Withers did not remain in her seat to watch the second half of the event. Next on the program, she saw by the bill in her hand, was "Roping a three-horse team in full gallop—Mr. Buck Keeley ..."

For some reason or other, Miss Withers wanted very much to get a close view of this Buck Keeley. There were still a few seats vacant in the boxes at the other side of the area. By a judicious combination of bullying and bribing, she managed to plant herself in a seat at the very ringside edge of the barrier, almost within reaching distance of the end pen. From its direction came the strong smell of horse, together with a muffled oath or two, and the rattle of shod heels against timber.

One of the two handy-men who had carried the backdrop for the shooting event now appeared on the scene bearing a big silver-mounted saddle on his shoulder, and a couple of coiled ropes under his arm. He entered the end pen, and immediately reappeared.

Laramie White and the girl had already made their exit, and the manager was approaching the loudspeaker again. "Ladeez and Gemmun, the next event ..."

The handy-man dropped the saddle and the ropes, and ran along the pens. "Keeley," he called. "Hey, Buck! Here's yer props, come saddle yer hoss ..."

Somebody else took up the cry ... "Where's Keeley?" Cowboys appeared in the exit ways, and sombreros were shoved up above the tops of the pens. "Buck! Time to get on!"

They kept up the cry for a few minutes, and then a messenger ran towards where Carrigan was still orating into the microphone.

In a moment his voice was booming again through the vast auditorium, informing the assembled devotees of sport that a slight readjustment of the program had been found necessary, and that instead of fancy roping by Mr. Buck Keeley, the next event would be a roping contest ... involving another artist and a wild yearling steer.

But Miss Withers did not remain to observe the subjugation of the wild yearling steer, who was already bellowing in one of the farther pens. She was making a fast sneak for the exit, with a shapeless something bundled beneath her coat.

Perhaps Mr. Buck Keeley had done his last job of fancy roping. But tucked to her bosom the schoolteacher held the lariat which he was to have used—the lariat which the handy-man had dropped beside the saddle in amazement at not finding Keeley in the pen with his horse.

Once more her cotton umbrella had stood Miss Withers in good stead, for the crooked handle had been just long enough to snag a loop of the rope. The saddle did not matter, she had seen one like it before ... decorated with the same silver mountings and blue working. It had been hanging on the wall of the room shared by Lew and Laurie Stait.

She thought that she had seen a facsimile of the lariat, too. But that had not been in the room shared by Lew and Laurie ... it had been wound firmly around the neck of a fair-haired young man who had leaped backwards into the air one evening at dusk ... and had thereafter lain still. Laurie Stait had worn a rope like this for a cravat.

There was the same kind of running knot here as in the death noose, and somewhat similar blue thread binding the other end to keep it from fraying. Perhaps it didn't mean anything. But Miss Withers was wondering.

All the way up to Seventy-sixth Street she wondered. There wasn't any sense in going ahead with this case until they knew how Laurie Stait had been killed. In spite of the medical examiner's report after listening to the Inspector's coaching, there was no real evidence here that a murder had been committed. If it was a murder, *How?*—not *Who?*—was the first question to ask.

Could an especially prepared noose have been dropped over the victim's head as his car passed another, bound in the opposite direction? Perhaps. Only it would take a true expert to drop a noose with such deadly

accuracy. And there were circumstances here which made Miss Withers wonder if that were possible.

Besides, if the noose had been hurled from another car, why would the dead or dying man have been seen by the one observer to leap *up* in the air before falling to the pavement? Miss Withers resolved to refer once more to her early notes on the testimony of the little taxi-driver, Leech.

She had had time to type out only a few of her notes as yet, and the sheets were lying on her desk in her apartment.

She unlocked the door with her own key, and saw Inspector Oscar Piper, taking the privileges of a regular caller, and seated in the one comfortable easy chair of her living room. In his mouth was a fuming perfecto, in his hands were the notes which she had begun to transcribe, and all around him was the sea of feathers which Miss Withers had not had time to clean up before she left.

“Good evening, Hildegard,” he said cheerfully. She tossed the coiled rope which she had stolen into the clothes closet, and hoped he had not seen it—yet. There would be time enough for that later.

“Do you know,” the Inspector observed with heavy sarcasm as she entered the room, smoothing her hair, “do you know, there’s nothing, after all, like a little spick-and-span nest where a man can relax! Hildegard, do you mind telling me why in the name of all that’s holy you choose to carpet your floor with these nasty feathers? I’ve got feathers in my nose, feathers in my eyes, feathers in my pockets. Have you girls varied the monotony of spinsterhood by having a duel to the death with pillows, or what?”

“I’ll show you what,” she told him. “I spent three hours today making a little experiment, Oscar Piper. I failed, which in a way I consider success. Now I want you to try it. Here!”

She opened a table drawer and suddenly whipped a gleaming blade out at him.

“I don’t suppose you noticed,” she said with a certain acidity in her tone, “that the pillows up at the Stait house were all stuffed with the best and softest goose down. Well, I’ve been trying to throw this knife through one of my own goose pillows that my mother took west with her from Boston before I was born, and I haven’t got anywhere.”

She indicated a pillow which she had propped up against the wall on a sofa across the room. There were a dozen or so slits in the linen slip, and feathers were spewed everywhere around.

“I’m not a knife thrower,” she told the Inspector. “See what you can do.”

He hefted the knife carefully, and then took it with the blade gripped firmly between his thumb and first finger. “A wop sergeant once showed me how it’s done,” he observed. “I’ll see if I remember ...”

His first try sent the knife whirling beautifully through the air, but only slapped the pillow with the handle instead of the blade. Miss Withers said nothing, but her attitude implied that he was worse at it than she had been herself. He tried again, and this time the blade flew unerringly toward its mark.

Rip it went through the pillow-slip, and that was all. For a second it hung in the air against the pillow, and then dropped to the sofa. The Inspector tried again, with the same result.

“Now try it closer,” Miss Withers suggested. “Get right in front of it. And if you can pin that pillow to the wall, even at that range, or if you can manage to cut a tiny slit in the back of the pillow, I’ll buy a box of cigars and smoke half of them myself.”

The Inspector took off his coat, and put down his cigar. Then he walked up to within three feet of the pillow and hurled the knife as if into the heart of his deadliest enemy. Once more the weapon penetrated no more than a quarter of an inch, and then dropped back.

Ten minutes later the Inspector gave it up as a bad job. Not even by laying the pillow down flat and stabbing at it with the knife gripped firmly in his hand could he penetrate the feathers.

He wiped the perspiration from his face. “Lord, woman, it’s like trying to stab a jellyfish. No resistance, but you don’t get anywhere.”

She was triumphant. “Exactly. I had an idea it would be this way. That’s why I insisted that you lend me the knife that nearly killed Hubert Stait, according to his own story. You see, I’ve helped stuff pillows, and I know that feathers are both the softest and the most obstinate things in the world. And whatever *did* happen last night in Hubert’s room, nobody threw this knife through his pillow, pinning it to the head of the bed!”

“Hmmm,” said the Inspector. “But the Sergeant found a slit in the back of the pillow, and a mark on the woodwork of the bed?”

“It’s possible that somebody took the knife and slit one of those holes ... or both of them, for that matter.” They both sat in silence for a moment.

“Now what do you know about that?” the Inspector said softly. “So nice little Hubert up and told us a lie!”

“He told us what looks like a lie,” Miss Withers reminded him. “But so have a lot of other people in this case.”

XIV

Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairee

"I THINK I'M ON the track at last," the Inspector was saying. He had relaxed in Miss Withers' big armchair, a sandwich in one hand and a glass of milk in the other, in lieu of dinner.

The school-teacher was attacking the feathers with a whisk broom, and succeeding only in scattering them like thistledown. "On the track of what? Or whom, if you prefer."

"The murderer of Laurie Stait, of course. In spite of all your trouble in proving that poor little Hubert was faking, I don't think that trail leads anywhere. Hubert was at the movie when the murder was committed, with the stupid but estimable Aunt Abbie. But I think I know—"

Miss Withers stopped bustling about with her broom. "You mean?"

"I mean the brother of Dana Waverly, that's who I mean. Charles Waverly, the distant relative and next male heir of the Stait family. He's a lawyer, and therefore in a position to know just what loot there would be in the Stait fortune."

"Lawyers usually have better ways of getting loot than committing murder for it," Miss Withers suggested dryly. "They play safe, as a rule."

"I found out some other things today, though." The Inspector, warmed by food, opened up and told the events which had transpired down in the Village. "Don't you see? Dana was engaged to Lew and she loved Laurie. But her brother was all for her marrying the so-called 'good twin.' Charles Waverly is much older than his sister, and they're orphans, so I suppose he's her natural guardian. Anyway, she had it all set to break the news to Lew Stait after dinner that night—the stuff in the icebox showed that she had planned on a guest—and she didn't look forward to the task as an easy job, because she undoubtedly tipped off her roommate to stay out of town for the week-end, and she'd laid her plans very carefully. What was the natural thing for her to do before making the plunge? See her brother, of course. I'll wager you anything you like that Dana called at Charles' office yesterday afternoon, and told him the news."

“Suppose she did?”

“Well, you remember that his office is in the Enterprise Trust Building. It might be just accident that it was outside that building that Laurie Stait got his, but I doubt it. I think that smart lawyer was foolish enough to take things in his own hands. He wanted Dana to marry Lew, perhaps for business reasons. Perhaps he knew that old Mrs. Stait was leaving her money to Lew. We can check that later. Anyway, he hated to see Laurie Stait supplant the other twin in his sister’s nuptial couch, and he took steps to see that it didn’t happen. By removing Laurie Stait from this scheme of things.”

“Perfect,” Miss Withers told him icily. “You have a perfect case there against Charles Waverly. Except that you haven’t shown how he knew that Laurie Stait was driving by at that particular hour. He might have known that Lew had a date with his sister—but where does Laurie come in?” Miss Withers stopped suddenly. “Tell me, Oscar, has it occurred to you that Lew Stait didn’t make any effort to keep his dinner date with Dana the night of the murder? We found him playing around with the maid, you remember, and it was past the dinner hour.”

“Maybe she’d called the dinner off?”

“No, she hadn’t. Because she phoned, don’t you remember, to ask for Lew, last night?”

The Inspector nodded. “Maybe Lew knew what the bad news was going to be and he dodged it? Yet that doesn’t fit, somehow, with his marrying the girl early the next morning.”

His face brightened. “Well, anyway, I’ve been thinking it over and I’m going to send a couple of the boys to bring Charley Waverly in for questioning. I’ve got a sneaking suspicion that the murder rope was dropped out of his office window.”

Miss Withers shook her head. “You’re barking up the wrong tree, Oscar. I think I see a glimmer of light, though.”

“Yeah? What is it?”

“I’m not telling you, yet,” she informed him. “But I’ll give you a hint. There’s something mighty interesting in that little Exhibit A you brought back with you from Dana Waverly’s apartment!”

The Inspector was surprised. “You mean the snapshot of Laurie and the collie dog taken last summer on the ranch?”

“Well, not exactly.” Miss Withers studied it for a moment. “A nice dog, that. But I was talking about something else. The diamond ring, Oscar. I never heard before of a bride who left her engagement ring at home during the ceremony.”

The Inspector reached for the phone. “All the same,” he said calmly, “I’m going to pick up this Waverly fellow. Not an arrest, exactly, just bring him in for questioning.” He spoke into the mouthpiece. “Spring 3100—all right, sister, have it your own way. Spring *seven* tharee one hundred ...”

Miss Withers sprung her surprise. “While your bloodhounds are out, you’d better have them pick up that wild cowboy Buck Keeley,” she suggested. She ducked into the closet for a moment, and came out with the rope which she had picked up at the Rodeo.

“Keeley? Oh, I don’t think he had anything to do with the murder.” And then the Inspector saw what she held in her hand. She told him where and how she had found it.

“Don’t forget,” she said, “that members of the Stait family testified that Laurie had been worried and upset since Monday, and that he had answered the phone himself and had denied himself to callers—everybody. Doesn’t it seem a coincidence that—”

“That the Rodeo opened here in town on Monday? Good Lord, maybe you’re right. Laurie Stait might have been threatened by Keeley. Maybe they had a fight out at the ranch this summer.” He gave rapid orders into the mouthpiece.

“Maybe they did have a fight,” Miss Withers agreed. “I’ve got a hunch what it was about, too. Wasn’t Laurie Stait supposed to be loose with women—and wasn’t Rose Keeley out there?”

“That beautiful iceberg?”

“Maybe she wasn’t an iceberg last summer,” Miss Withers insinuated. “Remember, Laurie got some letters from Wyoming after he returned to New York. And his brother testified that Laurie had been sitting alone in their room and staring at a brick wall across the court.”

“Scared or worried, huh ? I’ll just bet you that Keeley had been threatening him. Well, we’ll soon find out I sent a couple of the boys over to the Hotel Senator with instructions to pick him up.”

Miss Withers nodded absent-mindedly. “Oscar, do you happen to remember just what that little taxi-driver said he saw on Fifth Avenue last night—you know, the eye-witness? I’ve been trying to think.”

“Sure I remember,” Piper told her. “He said that there wasn’t any driver in the Chrysler. And he went on to explain that although the weather was pretty thick with snow and everything, he saw somebody jump out of the roadster, backwards!”

She shook her head. “There was something else. I didn’t take it down in shorthand because I didn’t think it was important. But we can’t get any farther in this case until we know how Laurie Stait was killed. Oscar, you’re supposed to have the trained memory. Didn’t Leech say something else, something important?”

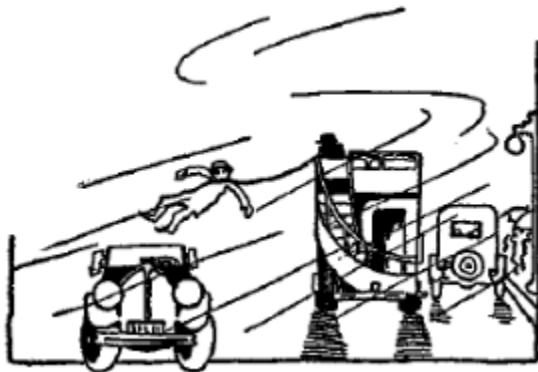
The Inspector shook his head. “I don’t remember anything. Oh, yes, he did say something about seeing the figure of a man rise right up out of the seat, with both arms flopping, like a scared frog jumping out of a puddle. He said it looked as if the fellow was trying to grab the side of a bus that was passing ...”

“Eureka!” shouted Miss Withers. “Now I know how the murder was committed. It wasn’t from a window of the Enterprise Trust. I’ll bet that Charley Waverly’s offices are in the rear somewhere. Anyway, it couldn’t happen from a window, nor from a Rodeo parade, because there wasn’t any ... nor from a car passing in the opposite direction, because the body would not have been pulled up out of the seat that way, at least not high enough so that it looked like a backward leap.” She was flushed with excitement.

“It was the bus I was trying to think of! The top of a bus is the only place from which that murder could have been committed.”

The Inspector stared at her. “But my dear lady, it’s ...”

“It’s not impossible, I tell you.” She snatched up a pencil and a sheet of typewriter paper. “It’s as clear as daylight, Oscar Piper. Wait until I sketch it for you ...”



The Inspector studied it at length. "You see? I put in the rope, to make it clearer, although of course Leech wouldn't notice it. The rope was light in color, remember, and it would blend with the snow. The murderer dropped it over Laurie Stait's head as the bus going north passed the south-bound roadster. The motion of the two cars was enough to jerk the victim out of his seat and into the air to crash on the pavement. It must have been a man, too, because it would take a lot of strength to withstand the shock."

"Not if the murderer took a hitch of the rope's end around the edge of the bus rail," pointed out the Inspector. "He could let go of the rope when his job was done, and let the body lie there in traffic while he sailed north on the bus-top! Good lord, woman, you've got it. We may be able to trace the murderer through the Fifth Avenue bus company. Although heaven knows there were probably fifty buses through that street at approximately five-thirty!"

"Look for an open bus," Miss Withers suggested.

"Why open? The murderer could have dropped his noose out of a side window just as well."

She shook her head. "If it had been a roofed bus, there'd have been other people up on the bus-top, and the murderer would have run too great a risk. He—or she, for it could have been a woman, you know—undoubtedly chose an open top bus. They still run some of them at this time of year, although there's few enough people who venture up there in a snowstorm. The murderer counted on that, you see."

The Inspector pursed his lips. "We'll find the conductor of that bus. He must have collected the fare from that passenger, whoever he was."

"Not necessarily. If the murderer was as smart as I think, he slipped aboard the bus when the conductor was collecting fares inside, and sneaked up the stairs. Ten to one the conductor wouldn't think it likely that anyone was up on top in that snowstorm."

"Maybe you're right, Hildegard. But it's something to work with, anyway. I'll start the wheels rolling first thing in the morning. I'll have Taylor or one of the boys interview every driver who had an open bus on the street at that hour. Maybe they did see something, after all."

He was rudely interrupted by the shrill clatter of Miss Withers' phone. It was Lieutenant Keller calling the Inspector, who listened for a moment, his brows narrowing.

“What? What’s that? When did he go? Who? Oh, never mind about the dame. Start the drag-net working. Broadcast his description to all outgoing ships. Cover all exits to the city and don’t forget the flying fields. Right.”

He hung up the phone a bit wearily. “What happened, Oscar? Did the smart Mr. Charles Waverly give you the slip?” Miss Withers moved closer.

Piper shook his head. “Who? No, they found him all right, and he is on his way down to Headquarters now. But your cowboy friend, Buck Keeley, has blew the town.” The Inspector made a vague gesture.

“Lieutenant Keller says that they went busting up to the Hotel Senator and found only Buck’s sister, Rose. And when she heard who they were, she flopped in a faint!”

Miss Withers’ eyebrows showed surprise. “Oscar, has it occurred to you that Rose Keeley isn’t the blushing violet type? She’s been fainting a good deal oftener than seems natural to me, unless—” The Inspector suddenly interrupted.

“I’ve got it! At last we’ve discovered a decent motive! They called Laurie Stait the bad twin, didn’t they? He was supposed to be a bit on the make with the fair sex ? Well, he and this Rose Keeley got a case on each other out at the ranch this summer. But brother Buck didn’t approve of his sister marrying any Eastern playboys, so he broke it up. And then when they left the ranch for the Rodeo tour and came to New York, he discovered that his sister was seeing Laurie again here, and he bumped him off with his own rope from the top of a bus, just like you said. And the sister knows or suspects, only she won’t squawk on her brother. That’s why she faints so easy!” He looked at the school-teacher for approval.

Miss Withers surveyed him thoughtfully. “Closer, Oscar. But still you don’t win a baby doll. Why should Buck Keeley object to his sister marrying an Easterner with money? I should think it would be just the kind of a marriage he would like to arrange.”

“You’re wrong, Hildegard. Naturally, Buck Keeley would object to his sister’s getting involved with a weak-kneed dude from the city. He’d want her to marry a son of the sagebrush.”

“Laurie Stait doesn’t look so weak-kneed to me. He played football at Columbia, you know. And I think you’ve been reading too much Zane Grey. People are pretty much alike, east or west. A rancher who tours with a Rodeo every winter isn’t apt to keep his natural simplicity very long.”

“That’s all very well. But Buck Keeley lammed, didn’t he? He took a runout powder, and that’s a pretty good confession of guilt. We’ll have him, though, inside of a few hours. Then we’ll see what story he tells when the boys put the sweat on him. Maybe he’ll have an excuse to offer why his rope got around Laurie Stait’s neck, but believe me, it better be good.” The Inspector rubbed his hands together, and he did not conceal the fact that in his opinion things were picking up.

“Are you going to throw the sister into jail, too?”

He shook his head. “Of course not. We’ll just put somebody on the job of tailing her. Maybe the brother will try to get in touch with her, or she’ll try to make a break and go to him if he’s still in town. Rose Keeley ought to make a good decoy, what?”

Miss Withers started suddenly. “A decoy? Maybe you’re right, Oscar. And maybe someone thought of that before. Perhaps she’s had practice at the job!”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning whatever you like. There’s something here that doesn’t meet the eye.”

The Inspector laughed. “All right, all right. I know that you’re still suspecting Lew Stait of killing his brother. Or maybe you think the human rabbit, Hubert, got up courage enough to do the job? I suppose that Aunt Abbie was his accomplice?”

Miss Withers shook her head. “I didn’t say I suspected Hubert, or the surviving twin, either. It doesn’t seem likely that a boy could kill his own twin in cold blood, it would be like suicide. But Lew Stait hasn’t explained a lot of things. He had no good alibi, in spite of the little maid. He made no effort to keep his date with Dana that night. And why did he hurry so to marry her the next morning? Why did he sneak past me in the hall in the Stait house last night, and why was the letter from Dana to Laurie pinned against the bottom of the kitchen table?” She got no answer to her questions.

The Inspector was struggling into his coat. “I’ll take this rope along with me,” he told Miss Withers. “I’ve got to get down and have my little chat with Charley Waverly. I may learn something about the Stait family, even if I’ve changed my mind about the possibility of Waverly’s being involved. Want to come along?”

She shook her head. "I'm very tired," she informed him. "Besides, I want to get up early tomorrow and make a little visit to the Stait house."

"What for? Going to congratulate the young married couple? Or have you got a sudden desire to hear the old lady's parrot swear a few more swears?"

"It might be both," Miss Withers told him. "But it doesn't happen to be either. I just want to borrow a book."

The Inspector stared at her, and then shrugged his shoulders. "I must be dashing, Hildegard. Go up to Stait's if you like, but I think I'll have this case settled before you get there. Buck Keeley will be dragged back to town before he gets very far, and then we'll see. Good-night, and pleasant dreams."

"Good-night," Miss Withers said softly. But when the Inspector was gone she did not seek her couch. She left a note for her roommates saying that she was going to be out late and please not to shoot the night bolt, and shortly afterward she was striding vigorously along Central Park West.

There were two men lounging in the lobby of the Hotel Senator whom Miss Withers recognized, but she did not speak to them, nor did they acknowledge her. Operatives on duty never greet each other, she knew.

Unannounced, she rang the bell of room number 1012. There was a long delay, and then a low, throaty voice answered from behind the panel. "Go away!"

Miss Withers rang the bell again, and then the door was suddenly thrown open. Rose Keeley stood there, dressed in mules and a ridiculous pink wrapper. Her eyes were red-rimmed, and her hair was touselled.

When she saw who it was she tried to swing the door shut, but Miss Withers interposed an agile oxford.

"You'd better talk to me," she suggested.

"I'll talk to nobody," said Rose Keeley hysterically. "If you want to arrest me, come on and arrest me. But I won't talk."

"I'm not a regular member of the police force," Miss Withers explained. "I'd like to help you, young woman. This visit is unofficial."

"You expect me to believe that? You're a spy, I know it! A police spy! Leave me alone, I tell you!"

"Calm yourself, Rose," advised Miss Withers. "Don't you know that in your condition it's dangerous to work yourself into hysteria?"

The girl's eyes widened, and she stepped back. "You ... you know?"

Miss Withers came into the hotel room, and seated herself in a chair near the bed. "Of course I know," she admitted. "A girl like you doesn't faint at the drop of a hat unless she's in what they call an interesting condition."

"Interesting? Well, it didn't interest the ones it should have, let me tell you!" Rose pulled herself up short, "What do you want to know? Why did you come here?"

"I came here to find out the truth," Miss Withers told her. "I think it's high time we got some truth into this business. Tell me, Rose, was it Laurie Stait?"

The girl hesitated, and a hard, almost calculating look came into her eyes. "Yes, it was." Then she suddenly regretted herself. "No, if you must know the truth, it wasn't. I ..."

She threw herself on the bed. "I'll tell you one thing, though. My brother had nothing to do with what happened to Laurie Stait. I know what you're thinking. I know what the police are thinking. Maybe Buck did threaten Laurie, but he didn't mean anything by it. I swear he didn't. If he's gone away it's only because somebody used a rope to kill that Stait fellow, and Buck knew they'd try to pin it on him. He has a horror of being behind bars, even overnight."

"Did you love Laurie Stait?" Miss Withers asked the question softly.

Rose Keeley laughed in her face. "Me? I should say not! Love him? I'll never love any man as long as I live. They're all alike. Not that he wasn't a nice enough kid out at the ranch last summer ..."

Miss Withers remembered something. "Didn't Laurie have a dog out there, a young collie dog?"

"Oh, you mean Rowdy! We got him from the kennels at Butte early in the summer because Buck thought it would be nice for the dudes to have a pup to play with. Only Rowdy attached himself to Laurie Stait and wouldn't pay any attention to anybody else. I guess blooded dogs are thataway. It pretty near broke poor Rowdy's heart when Mr. Stait—I mean Laurie—had to leave the ranch and come back east. He wanted to buy him, but he didn't have any place here to keep him, he said. Rowdy wouldn't chow for a week, he was so lonesome after Mr. Stait left. He's never been the same dog since—he still meets the station wagon every day expecting to see his pard come back."

“And he never will,” put in Miss Withers. “Because the man he learned to love is going to be laid away in a vault day after tomorrow. Murder is bad business, Rose. I hope your brother didn’t have anything to do with it, but you realize that it looks bad for him. Unless he can prove where he was at the time of the murder.”

“But he can! He told me all about it. Buck has a perfect alibi. He was with Carrigan and some of the boys, and they got into a fight with a policeman outside the hotel here, over a taxicab bill. They’ll all bear witness ...

“But they have,” Miss Withers told her grimly. “Don’t you remember? You claimed earlier today that Buck was with you in the hotel here at that hour, and Carrigan and that Mr. Laramie White insisted that he wasn’t with them. Isn’t that right?”

Rose Keeley nodded her head, miserably. Her eyes were clouded, and she seemed to be torn between a desire to say something and the necessity for keeping quiet. Miss Withers rose to her feet.

“One thing more, young lady. When was the last time you saw Laurie Stait?”

“Him? Why, when he left the ranch last summer ...”

“You didn’t see him here in New York?”

She shook her head. “I tried to phone him, but he wouldn’t see me. I ... Oh, there’s no use. I won’t say anything more, and you can’t make me.”

Miss Withers patted her shoulder. “I’d like to help you, child,” she said. “And the best advice I can give you is to go down and tell the whole story to Inspector Piper in the morning. If you know where your brother is, you’d better advise him to come back and face the music. If he isn’t guilty, nothing can happen to him. The sooner you get it over with the sooner you can go back to your own country, and be happy ...”

She drew a blank on that one. Rose Keeley sat up on the bed, eyes wide and lips twisted in a sneer.

“Go back west, and be happy? Say, you don’t think I like it out there, do you?”

“But I thought ...”

“You’ve never lived through a Wyoming winter,” Rose Keeley told her savagely. “Snowdrifts up to your armpits, blizzards three days a week, and mail about twice a month. You’ve never lived a day’s drive from the nearest

town, where you can't buy anything or go anywhere or have any fun! I hate it, I tell you!"

"But the summers ..."

"The summers are great for the dudes, that have money. They come out and howl about the air and the sun and the mountains. But for us it's just a lot of damned hard work. Playing bellhop for a lot of tourists. Say, the only good times I ever have are on these tours with the Rodeo, and there's no money in them. The only advantage of it is that we get away from that damned prairie for awhile, and see a little city life!"

"If you feel that way about it, why don't you leave the ranch and get a job here?"

Rose Keeley laughed again, with a bitter ring in her voice. "What would I do here? Who wants a girl who can shoot and ride a horse? The only way I could ever leave the ranch is to marry somebody from the city. That's my only chance for happiness. Otherwise I'll be buried out there on the prairie all my life!"

"I see," said Miss Withers. And she was beginning to, at that.

XV

Giving the Bride Away

A YOUNGISH MAN SAT IN the none-too-easy chair of Inspector Piper's sanctum, and tugged at the wisp of yellow moustache which adorned his upper lip. His general air was that of a crisp and decisive young business man, as indeed he had shown himself.

"Mr. Charles Waverly," began the Inspector heavily, "I'm sorry to trouble you at this hour of the evening. But there are a few little questions I'd like to ask you in regard to the murder of Laurie Stait. We're trying to investigate every angle of the case, and as the family lawyer you can be of the utmost assistance to us if you wish."

Charles Waverly intimated with a wave of his hand that he would be only too delighted to aid the Inspector.

"Very well. You are related to the Stait family yourself, are you not?"

The lawyer nodded. "I happen to be a grand-nephew of the late Roscoe Stait, husband of the present Mrs. Stait."

"That's the old lady with the naked parrot?" Waverly grinned momentarily, and nodded.

The Inspector made much ado about lighting up a cigar, though he seemingly forgot to offer his guest one. "Just what is the condition of the family fortune? The old lady is pretty rich, isn't she?"

"Yes and no," the young lawyer answered, without hesitation. "The Stait fortune was at one time very large. Most of it is invested in New York real estate, which at the present time is sadly depreciated in value. I should say that the yearly income is in the neighborhood of thirty thousand dollars, or slightly more. However, it is not correct to say that Mrs. Stait, or Gran as we call her, is particularly wealthy, because according to the terms of her husband's will she only controls the income during her lifetime. The property is in trust, entail is the legal term, and on Mrs. Stait's death it devolves upon the nearest male heir of the Stait family."

The Inspector nodded. "That would be Lew Stait?"

“What? Oh, yes, yes, of course. Laurie was the elder twin, then Lew of course would be the next in line.”

“And after Lew?” The question was almost too casual.

Charles Waverly looked surprised. “In the event of Lew’s dying without male heirs of his body—that is, without a son—the estate would devolve upon Hubert Stait, his cousin.”

“And after Hubert?”

The lawyer smiled again. “I’m afraid I’ll have to confess that I myself would be the lucky one in that event, Inspector. Roscoe Stait made explicit directions in his will that his property should never go outright to a woman, and he tried in every possible way to make sure that the male line would continue. If I were to inherit, I should have legally to adopt the name of Stait, however.”

“I see. Tell me, what was the reason for the estate’s being entailed in this fashion? It’s not usual, is it?”

The lawyer shook his head. “Old Roscoe Stait didn’t trust women, you see. He lived all his life under a sort of shadow. His married life was happy enough, I guess, but he never slept at night very soundly. It’s a sort of skeleton in the family closet, Inspector, but I suppose you have the right to know. You have heard, perhaps, of Eva Montelli?”

The Inspector frowned. “Eva Montelli? It has vague associations, but I’m not sure. Wasn’t she the housewife over in Jersey who poisoned her husband a few years back? Or was she the Washington Lure?”

“Neither one. It was a long time before your day or mine, Inspector. Eva Montelli was what she called herself, and if she ever had another name she succeeded in losing it. Those were the gay days just after the Civil War when New York society discovered opera. Eva Montelli was the Mary Garden of her day, a contralto with a voice, they said, like an houri. She certainly had the looks, and some of the habits, of one. She was the darling of the gay young bloods, and it was from her slipper that champagne tasted best, so the stories run. I’ve seen a few pictures of her, and although she had an hour-glass figure and too much dignity for my taste, she was a beautiful woman all the same.”

“And old Roscoe Stait got himself involved with this Montelli opera singer?”

“Worse than that. It seems that she had been having an affair with the Director of the opera company, a broken-down Wagnerian tenor named

Havemeyer. How serious an affair nobody knows. But she was no puritan. Then she met Roscoe Stait, and married him.”

“So? The old man was married twice?” The Inspector was interested.

“No, only once. But my story isn’t over. Eva Montelli married the old millionaire after a romantic elopement sort of business, and there was much rejoicing. Perhaps she loved him. I don’t know why the idea has grown up that women can marry only poor men for love. Anyway, this thick-skulled Prussian of a Havemeyer brooded over things until he got himself into a fine temperamental rage, and then he called on the happy bridegroom with a pocketful of Eva’s letters, as well as some other evidence to prove or insinuate that she was not what her new husband hoped. It was a pretty rotten thing for him to do, and that’s why when he was found riddled with bullet holes the jury freed Eva Montelli Stait after fifteen minutes’ deliberation. The story goes that each juryman kissed her hand when she thanked them. Roscoe Stait did the gentlemanly thing and took his wife back with open arms—then he locked her in the upper floors of his house and kept her there.”

“And she stood for that?”

“Evidently she did. Maybe she got used to being shut away from other men. Her husband had the idea, you see, that her beauty was fatal. Anyway, even after his death she went on expiating her ‘justifiable homicide’ in the same way, living in the attic of the Stait house with only a parrot for company. That was where her two sons were born—both dead now. Oh, she’s been known to come down stairs, and she rules that family with an iron hand, though there’s nobody left but her two grandsons now ... and Hubert and Aunt Abbie who’ve found a home there. You can figure it out as you like. Personally, I think she’s a trifle touched. Sometimes she sings to herself up there at night, and it’s weird enough, God knows. But you can’t make her believe that she’s paying more than that worthless fat tenor was worth, and there she stays, drying up a little more every year.”

The Inspector shook his head. “It’s unhealthy to be shut up anywhere, for anything. She’d have been better off if they’d sent her up the river for that killing. But tell me, why did she hate Laurie?”

“Laurie? I don’t think she did hate him, exactly. Of course, she gave that car to Lew, but she knew he’d let his brother use it. But she was fanatical about sex, partly on account of her own early experience, I

suppose. And she had the idea that Laurie was a rounder with women, and intimate with the maid.”

“I saw *Lew* Stait with the little Dutch maid,” confessed the Inspector. “The night of the murder. Maybe Laurie was blamed for the sins of his twin?”

And that remark surprised Charles Waverly all out of proportion to its significance. The Inspector pretended not to notice anything.

“One more question,” he began. “Mrs. Stait said something about your having a chat with a man sometime last week who came to see Laurie, a man with an accent, she said.”

Charles Waverly nodded. “It was a westerner, a big, hearty fellow with one of those trick hats in his hand. He wanted to talk to Laurie, and I finally got out of him that he was appearing in behalf of his sister. Laurie had spent the summer at their ranch out west, and it appeared that the sister was in a family way.

“I pointed out to him the legal aspects of the case, and then he was bold enough to demand that if Laurie wouldn’t marry his sister, he should make a cash settlement, which put the whole thing in the light of blackmail to me, and I told him so. I made it clear that Laurie Stait would have all the protection that his family position could give him, and the cowboy went away using pretty strong language.”

“Yeah?” The Inspector rose to his feet. “And you didn’t come and give me this information when you heard that Laurie Stait had been strangled with a western lariat? My God, man, that’s a clear motive for murder!”

Charles Waverly shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t think so. It seemed to me that this Keeley fellow was more put out at not getting some easy money than he was about his sister.”

“But why have you kept this to yourself for all this time?”

“I hoped it would never come out,” admitted the young lawyer. “For my sister’s sake, mostly.”

“But how would it affect your sister Dana? She married Lew Stait and it wouldn’t hurt the dead twin to have a scandal attached to his name.”

“What? Oh, quite right, Inspector. I was in error, I know. But as the family lawyer, I wished to keep it all back if possible. Because Dana’s unfortunate marriage this morning—”

The Inspector leaped into the breach. “Unfortunate? Why, I understand that you were in favor of her marrying Lew, and that you were afraid of her

marrying Laurie?"

"Of course. I meant that the marriage was unfortunate in the time chosen, and not in itself. You see, I love my sister Dana more than anything else in the world, and I'd do anything short of murder to see her happy."

The Inspector nodded. "Tell me, Waverly. At what time the afternoon of the murder did your sister Dana come to your office. It was early, wasn't it?"

Charles Waverly did not flinch. "You can't trap a lawyer, Inspector."

"But she was at your office? She came there to tell you that she wouldn't marry Lew, didn't she?"

Charley Waverly did show a start at that. "Damn that stenographer of mine. Did Mildred tell you that? She must have, because I know Dana wouldn't ..."

"Dana didn't," the Inspector announced. "She's avoided being questioned, so far." He stood up, and stepped toward the door of the outer office. "Excuse me a moment, will you?"

A night man in uniform was waiting in the outer office, and the Inspector gave quick, explicit instructions. "Remember—a girl named Mildred something." Then he was back at his desk.

"You haven't answered my question, Mr. Waverly."

"I don't think I need to answer it. My sister did call on me that afternoon, and she did discuss with me her problem. She was engaged to Lew Stait, and infatuated with his twin brother. That's all I care to say at this time."

"Very well." The Inspector leaned closer to his guest. "You couldn't hazard a guess as to who might have killed Laurie Stait, could you?"

"I'm sorry, Inspector. It's a mystery to me."

"Of course it is. And you wouldn't care to suggest who the man might have been who identified the body of Laurie Stait in the lobby of the Enterprise Trust Building, and then retracted his identification and slipped away in the crowd? The officer in charge said that it was a tall man with a little moustache—and your office happens to be in that building."

Charles Waverly shook his head. "That will not get you anywhere, Inspector. There are several thousand tenants in that building, and it is only natural that there should be a good many persons on the busiest corner in the world who happen to be tall and have moustaches. It really won't do ... and unless you have something awfully important to ask me now, I'd like to

run along home. It's a long subway ride up to my little apartment on East Seventieth."

The Inspector apologized for the inconvenient location of Headquarters. "It's too bad," he said, "that we aren't closer to Fifth Avenue. Buses are a lot more comfortable than subways, don't you agree with me?"

Waverly nodded. "I always take a bus in preference to any other mode of travel," he admitted. "I ride down every morning to my office on an open bus, if the weather permits, and it peps me up for the day. Usually I go home the same way. Well, good night, Inspector. If there's anything else I can tell you—"

"If there's anything else you can tell me, you're smart enough not to," the Inspector said under his breath. But he let the smart young lawyer pass out of the office.

The Inspector relaxed into his chair again, and crossed his feet on his desk. "I wonder how good an actor this Waverly fellow is?" he said softly. "Never batted an eye when I mentioned the bus. If he'd had an ounce of guilty conscience he would have denied ever using the buses—supposing that Hildegard is right about the way the job was done. I wonder—"

He was still wondering an hour or two later when he got a report over the telephone.

"I found her, Inspector," came Swarthout's excited tenor. "Name's Mildred Hotchkiss. Lives in the Bronx, which is where I am at the moment, calling from a drug store. She's worked for Charley Waverly as stenog—she calls it secretary—for a couple of years, and with a little pressure I got one thing out of her, though I don't think she knows that it means anything, and I'm not sure what it means myself. But anyway, Dana Waverly and her brother had a hell of a quarrel that afternoon of the murder. It was something about a promise she'd made to him in the past. Waverly sent Mildred on an errand, but she came back in time to hear the girl say to her brother—"Those stories are all lies, and he loves me. I know he loves me, because he carries the only love letter I ever wrote him around in his billfold right now!" She's a cute little trick, Inspector. Want me to stick on the job?"

"I do not. You'd better come back to town and get yourself some sleep. Get it in bed, your own bed, and not under a table in some speakeasy. It'll do you more good."

The Inspector crashed the receiver and debated whether or not to allow himself just one more cigar before going home. The cigar won the decision, and when it was burning merrily, he pulled a pad of paper out of his drawer and made a number of markings which partook of the nature of a cryptogram. He drew a square, quartered it, blocked in the quarters, and then added a decoration of a chimney and a roof to the top. He followed this masterpiece of surrealism with a fresco of automobile wheels, and a couple of somewhat shaky triangles. Then he wrote:

*Billfold—Lew's—missing when his aunt wanted money for taxi
but discovered that same night in a post office collection box, with the
dough in tact*

Billfold—Laurie's—missing from the corpse

Billfold—Somebody's—contained a love letter of Dana Waverly's

Inspector Piper then drew a large question mark, added legs and a silk hat to it, and went home to bed.

XVI

Coffee for Newlyweds

LONG EXPERIENCE AS A teacher had given Miss Withers the pet theory that the time to find out anything that someone doesn't want to tell is early in the morning. She knew that a large majority of the world's citizens awaken by slow degrees, with resistance at a low ebb, and whenever she found it necessary to determine a culprit among her pupils at Jefferson School she made the accusation bright and early the next morning as the boys and girls were filing into their seats.

Grade Three at Jefferson School was now being administrated—undoubtedly very badly—by a substitute, but in her avocation of sleuthing Miss Withers applied the same technique. Thus it was that she rang the bell at the servant's entrance of the Stait house a few minutes after eight o'clock the next morning.

A clatter of pans died away inside, but otherwise there was no answer. Miss Withers rang again, and suddenly the door was flung open and a large and shining butcher knife was presented before her maidenly breast.

"Hands up!" demanded a highly nervous voice. It was Mrs. Hoff, but her vast bulk was trembling like Jello in a high wind.

Miss Withers put up, not her hands, but her eyebrows. Slowly the weapon was withdrawn.

"You can come in," said Mrs. Hoff grudgingly. "I not know who it wass. The way things happen in this house, I take no chances."

"You certainly do not, but anyone who comes near you takes a good many," said Miss Withers. She advanced into the kitchen, but stopped short on seeing Gretchen, the little blonde maid, also with a large and glittering knife.

Gretchen proceeded to bisect an orange, and add it to a bowl of yellow semisphere beside her. Then she rose to her feet and made a bee-line for the hall.

"Never mind her," Miss Withers told the cook. "It's you I want to talk to. You realize, of course, that it is to your best interest to aid the police in

every possible way? You could be arrested, if that detective wanted to press the charge, for resisting an officer, mayhem, assault and battery, attack with a deadly weapon and the intent to kill ...”

“I not do any of those things,” Mrs. Hoff said weakly. “I only hit him with a skillet.” But her resistance was ebbing away. She subsided into a rocking chair, and stared out of the window.

Miss Withers wasn’t sure how to begin. She surveyed the preparations for breakfast. A dozen slices of bacon lay on a plate beside the stove. On the table stood a large and formidable device which resembled a mammoth hour-glass, with an aluminum band in the narrow neck. Above, boiling water slowly subsided to reappear in the crystal-clear compartment at the bottom as golden brown coffee.

“That’s a French drip machine,” volunteered the cook. “Mrs. Stait is very fussy about her coffee. So is the whole family, except Mr. Lew, of course. Until last night he never drank a cup in his life, willingly.”

Miss Withers had her lead. “Yes? Then Mr. Lew’s tastes have changed since the—the accident to his brother?”

Mrs. Hoff nodded. “Ja, in a way. Mr. Laurie never drank coffee, either, though. You see, as boys both the twins used to have to take their castor oil in coffee, and they always said that the two tasted just alike to them after they got grown up.”

“Oh.” Miss Withers was disappointed. “But you said that Mr. Lew drank some last night?”

Mrs. Hoff nodded. “Strange it wass for him. But marriage changes everybody, I guess. Last night late he and his new wife send down twice for coffee, each time two cups. And they say I don’t make it strong enough.” The cook’s fat face widened into a Rabelaisian smile. “When I was first married I didn’t need coffee at night to keep from going to sleep, let me tell you! But these young people today”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Miss Withers changed the subject. “Do you think the young couple are happy, Mrs. Hoff?”

“Happy? Why not? They are young, they should be happy.”

“But do you think they’re in love? It wasn’t usual for them to marry the way they did just after what happened to Mr. Lew’s twin brother.”

Mrs. Hoff frowned. “I wonder about that, too. Maybe Mr. Lew was lonesome after his brother die, and he was not able to stand it alone. Anyway, they act like a couple of lovers, I know that. Sad and happy all at

the same time. When I bring up the coffee last night, they are both excited, and she is crying. But they hold hands, all the same.”

Miss Withers filed that away for future reference. “Do you notice any other change in Mr. Lew since he got married?”

“Change? No, I don’t see any change. He’s not eat much these days, but that is not so strange. Mr. Hubert is the only one of the family who has his appetite these dark days. And the aunt, of course, when she remembers to come to the table. She is so absent-minded that she gets reading a book or a magazine and she doesn’t know the passing of time.”

Mrs. Hoff sighed and shook her head at the idea of anyone missing a meal from forgetfulness.

“I haf to get the breakfast now,” she reminded her caller. “Mrs. Stait will want her tray in a minute. And the rest of them come down soon.”

“Tell me,” said Miss Withers. “Do all the members of the family eat together? Is everything friendly? Have they accepted Dana, Mr. Lew’s new wife?”

The cook nodded. “Of course. Miss Dana has been a guest here for many a meal, and they’ve been engaged for a long time. All members of the family eat together, except this morning I think Mr. Lew goes out early ...” A bell buzzed dully above the cabinet, and Mrs. Hoff leaped out of her chair. “There,” she announced triumphantly, “I knew it! Mrs. Stait wants her tray, and it isn’t ready.”

Bacon sizzled into a frying pan, and then a bell down the hall tinkled alarmingly. “That’s the family in the dining room,” wailed Mrs. Hoff. “I shall lose my job for this!”

“Say nothing about it,” warned Miss Withers, and she strode out into the hall. She ran into Gretchen, who was lurking outside the open door of the dining room.

The girl looked at her with wide, angry eyes. “Don’t let her tell you that Mr. Lew hasn’t changed,” whispered Gretchen. “He’s not the same at all, and I ought to know. He’s stiff and formal and different since he married that ... that girl. He’s not his old free, cheery self at all!”

Miss Withers nodded. “Tell me, Gretchen, are all the family in there?” She pointed to the dining room.

“Everybody that’s coming down, yes mam. Mrs. Stait never comes down stairs, you know, and Mr. Lew went out early without his breakfast. Shall I show you into the living room until they get through?”

“Gretchen!” Mrs. Hoff’s voice, low but insistent, sounded from the kitchen. “Gretchen, carry in the coffee!”

“Never mind announcing me,” Miss Withers decided. “I’ll find my way by myself.” Gretchen ran toward the kitchen, and Miss Withers tiptoed up the hall.

She paused just outside the dining room door. There was much rattling of newspapers inside, but very little conversation, and that little was strained. Hubert clinked his coffee cup, and mumbled something, probably to Dana. Whatever it was that Miss Withers had hoped to hear, she did not hear it.

She drew a deep breath, and stepped quickly past the doorway, catching a quick glimpse of the three who sat at one end of the long refectory table. Hubert and Aunt Abbie were deep in the *Times*, and the girl who had been Dana Waverly was tracing a design on the table cloth with her fork. Even at this ungodly hour Dana was good looking, there was no denying that. Very much like her picture, the picture that the Inspector and Miss Withers had discovered hidden away beneath a bureau in the upstairs room, only with an added touch of emotional strain that was not hard to understand.

The hall was dark, and as Miss Withers had hoped, no one recognized her, although Aunt Abbie called petulantly ... “Gretchen, whatever is keeping you?” after her.

But she did not wait in the living room, after all. With a cautious glance behind her, she turned and went up the stairs.

This time Miss Withers wasted no precious seconds in a survey of Aunt Abbie’s room, nor in the bath which opened into the hall. She went quickly to the large room at the rear of the house—the room which had been shared by the twins, and which now was quite evidently shared by Lew Stait and his bride. It was a strange, almost terrible, setting for a honeymoon, and Miss Withers was not surprised that the young couple needed coffee at midnight.

The atmosphere of this room had been subtly and femininely changed, somehow, overnight. She noticed that the saddle and spurs had been taken down from the wall. But the bookcase was still there. Miss Withers thumbed the titles for a moment, and at last found what she was seeking, and tucked it, without a qualm, inside her dress. It was only a small, tan

volume with a crude drawing of a boy and a monkey on the cover, but it was suddenly important to her.

The position of sneak thief was abhorrent to Miss Withers, and she turned to leave the room as quickly as she had come. But something caught her eye.

It was not the incongruously feminine pajamas of cerise silk which had been flung across the footboard of the bed that Laurie Stait would never sleep in again. The room was littered with such garments. But on the mirror was a square of white paper. Miss Withers decided that she wanted to know what it meant.

She soon found out. It was a rough scrawl in pencil—"Dearest darlinest Dana," it began. "I've got an idea, and I don't want to wake you, so I'm slipping out early. I'll be back in about an hour with the ring and things you left at the apartment downtown in the Village—if the police find them it means trouble. Eleven million kisses—" It was signed with a scrawled letter "L."

Miss Withers stared at it as if she meant to commit it to memory, every line, and then suddenly tucked it away inside the pages of the book she had taken from the case. A suspicion which had been worming its way around the corners of her mind suddenly widened into a hunch, and Miss Withers believed in playing her hunches.

"I'll be in a fine kettle of fish if anyone finds me here," she said to herself softly.

Someone did. At that moment the alarm was sounded shrilly behind her.

"Thieves! Thieves! Robbers! Get a gun, get a gun. Sic 'em, sic 'em!"

She whirled, her hand at her throat, to see the loathsome white body of the naked parrot, Skipper, in the doorway. He waddled forward a step or two, waving his featherless wings, and then burst into a flood of the foulest profanity that Miss Withers had ever heard, ending up with a word positively Chaucerian.

"I'd like to wash out your mouth with soap," Miss Withers told him bitterly.

But Skipper only leered at her. "Birdseed, boys, birdseed! Hell and damnation!" He flopped closer, his beak snapping unpleasantly like the jaws of a trap. To Miss Withers he looked like a weird Hebrew penguin.

“Don’t you come near me, you filthy beast,” she implored, and then suddenly turned and ran past him out of the room and down the stairs.

Skipper hopped after her as far as the landing and said unprintable things. He was in reality only annoyed because he, like the rest of the inmates of the house, had been unreasonably delayed in breakfasting, but Skipper was cursed with an unfortunate upbringing spent at sea, and a physical appearance which made him look like a witch’s familiar spirit.

Miss Withers was barely in the living room, perched in the shadow of a high-backed chair, when she heard the outer door open and someone come in. She caught a flash of Lew Stait’s face, white and drawn, as he passed toward the dining room, and as always Miss Withers had the momentary and revulsive sensation that here was a dead man walking. For she had first seen that face blackened and twisted above a noose of hemp ...

Miss Withers remained alone with her thoughts for only a few moments, and then Aunt Abbie, pale and fluttering, hastened into the room, followed by Hubert Stait.

“Oh, how do you do?” Aunt Abbie wanted to know. “Gretchen just told me you were here, or we wouldn’t have kept you waiting. You’re the lady from the Police, aren’t you?”

Miss Withers laid claim to a somewhat remote connection with officialdom. “I came here this morning to ask you if by any chance you had remembered anything which might shed light on the murder of your nephew,” she explained. “Sometimes there are details which come out only after a day or two’s thinking.”

Aunt Abbie nodded. “Yes, yes, of course. But I’m sure I don’t remember anything, do you, Hubert? I think it’s terrible that the police haven’t been able to make an arrest in all this time. What are we paying taxes for, I’d like to know? I’m sure we’ve given all the help we can, and the police ought to be able to find out who Laurie’s enemies were. Of course, the poor dear boy was his own worst enemy, that’s what I’ve always said ...”

Aunt Abbie walked up and down the room nervously. “I’m sure that if I remember anything which might have a bearing on the case I’ll telephone the police at once. You’ll excuse me now—I must go in to breakfast.”

“But Aunt Abbie,” Hubert interposed. “You’ve just come from breakfast, don’t you remember?”

Aunt Abbie stopped short. "Breakfast? Have I, really? Yes, yes, of course. The terrible events of the past few days have quite upset me, I'm sure. I believe I'll go to my room and lie down. I really don't feel like any more of this."

Neither did Miss Withers, and she let the fluttery lady go without protest. Hubert remained, staring at Miss Withers through his thick-lensed glasses.

"Tell me," he said suddenly. "Are the police getting anywhere? Have they got any idea who killed Laurie?"

"I think so," Miss Withers informed him. "I think we're on the track of the murderer, all right. It's only a question of time."

Hubert came closer. "I'm glad of that. I was afraid that this was one of those perfect crimes we read about. Of course you know about the cowboy who was threatening Laurie all week. Is it he whom you suspect? I won't feel safe until I know that the killer is behind bars where he belongs. Is it the cowboy?"

"Perhaps," Miss Withers told him. "And perhaps it's someone else."

"Who else?" Hubert didn't look very surprised. But before Miss Withers could answer his question there were voices in the hall, and Lew Stait, followed by Dana, entered the room. They kept very close together.

Perhaps Miss Withers imagined it, but she thought that Lew's eyes caught Hubert's in a quick, questioning glance. The latter spoke, quickly.

"As you know, Miss Withers, I'll do anything in my power to aid the police in any way," he assured her. "I only want to see this terrible business settled before it ruins all our lives." He turned to the newcomers. "Dana, this is Miss Withers, who is making an investigation of the case for the police. Have you two met?"

Miss Withers got her first good look at the girl who had been Dana Waverly, and who was now Mrs. Lewis Stait by the grace of God and the authority of the State of Connecticut.

The wide eyes met hers without wavering, and their smoky depths betrayed no secrets. "How do you do?" said Dana softly, as if the answer to her question was quite immaterial. Miss Withers did not answer it.

"I'll be running along, because I know you have some questions to ask," Hubert said meaningly. He stopped in the doorway to flash Miss Withers a somewhat hunted smile, and then climbed sedately up the stair.

Lew Stait faced the school-teacher. "I don't see why we can't be let alone," he said bitterly. "I suppose it seems strange to you that we—that we got married when we did?"

Dana's hand reached for his, and caught it.

Miss Withers shook her head. "It isn't any of my business," she said.

"I wish the newspapers felt that way about us," Lew said. "They've been raising a most terrible hullabaloo. But we love each other, and I wanted to be where I could protect Dana from this unpleasantness as much as possible."

"I see," said Miss Withers. "You must forgive me if I seem impertinent. But the only chance we have of solving the murder of your brother is to ask a lot of questions and follow up every clue. Tell me, who do you think killed Laurie Stait?"

Lew sank into a chair, and his young wife planted herself on the arm, with her hand on his shoulder.

"I know who killed my brother." He said the words dully. "It was that roughneck Keeley, who ran the ranch where Laurie spent the summer. The police must know by now that he came here threatening Laurie, and that my brother was killed with one of Keeley's ropes."

"And why would Buck Keeley want to kill your brother? Was it because of the condition his sister is in?"

She realized that she had said the wrong thing—the very wrong thing.

"It is not!" Lew half rose in his chair. "The man is crazy, I tell you. He's a homicidal maniac. Because I know that nothing happened at that ranch which Laurie should have been ashamed of. That girl meant nothing to him, I tell you, and never did. He never laid a hand on her ..."

It was a delicate subject, but Miss Withers pressed it. "Such things have a way of happening," she pointed out. "Rose Keeley is going to have a baby, you know. How can you be so sure?"

"I'm as sure of it as I'm sure of—of anything," said Lew proudly. "Because—well, well, because Laurie told me!" His voice was strained and nervous now, pitched too high.

Dana Waverly turned her wide eyes on her young husband, and their bodies moved imperceptibly apart.

"Whatever that girl says about Laurie is a *lie*," Lew insisted. "He was innocent of any charge she can make!"

“But she doesn’t say anything,” Miss Withers informed him. “I talked to her last night, and she avoided the subject. But never mind that. Suppose, just for the sake of argument, that the cowboy had nothing to do with it.” She lowered her voice. “Do you think that, for any reason in the world, your cousin Hubert’s alibi could have been faked, and he might have committed the murder?”

There was a long pause, and if Lew Stait was not honestly surprised he was a better actor than Miss Withers gave him credit for.

“Hubert? Good heavens, no. Why, we twins have always been his best pals. I didn’t know he had an alibi—the Inspector told us not to discuss this case among ourselves, and we’ve steered off the subject here in the household. But Hubert doesn’t need an alibi. He couldn’t have had anything to do with the murder. It’s unthinkable ...”

“But” Dana started to speak, and then thought better of it. Miss Withers wondered if the young bride had been about to disagree with her husband, and waited a moment, but no more information came forth.

“That’s all I wanted to know,” Miss Withers decided. “I’m sorry to have intruded like this. May I say that I wish you very good luck?”

Lew Stait thanked her, and Dana smiled a crooked little smile. “We’ll need all the good luck we can get,” she said. They passed on toward the stair but not arm in arm as when they had come in. Miss Withers paused in the hallway to button her overcoat before braving the chill wind of the river-front.

A hand touched her shoulder, startling the good lady considerably. It was Hubert again, his eyes wide and blinking behind the glasses.

“I want a word with you,” he whispered. “I know you think that the cowboy killed my cousin. Maybe he did, but I doubt it. It was somebody closer to Laurie than that, somebody who knew he was driving down Fifth Avenue at that hour—somebody who pretended to be his friend. Perhaps closer than a friend!”

“Yes? Who do you think that could be?” Miss Withers was casual.

Hubert looked behind him before he spoke. Then he came closer. “I’m afraid for my life,” he whispered. “The deaths in this family aren’t over yet, by a long way. And ... if you want to find out who killed Laurie Stait, *watch his twin brother Lew!*”

With that Hubert turned suddenly and scuttled up the stair as if his own shadow threatened him.

XVII

An Ellinson Never Forgets

THE INSPECTOR PUT DOWN his telephone and crossed his feet luxuriously on his desk.

“Hildegarde,” he announced, “you be the first to congratulate me.”

Miss Withers closed the door behind her, and came into his office.

“And just why did you think I should congratulate you? I suppose you’ve solved the Stait murder? Or maybe you found Charley Ross and Judge Crater all at once?”

“Your first guess was correct,” he informed her, letting two beautiful smoke rings rise in undulating whirls above his head.

Miss Withers had a quick thrill of apprehension. “You solved it? How?”

“Well, I just got word that my men have picked up Buck Keeley.”

“Oh!” Miss Withers subsided into a chair with a distinct sigh of relief.

“Well, you don’t seem very excited?”

“I’m not. I was afraid for a moment that you’d beaten me, Oscar Piper. But you and your Buck Keeley!”

“Yeah? Well, if Buck Keeley didn’t kill Laurie Stait, I’d like to know who did! He had the motive, didn’t he—with his sister like you said, in a family way? He had the rope, and the skill to use it. And he’d been making threats, everybody knew that.”

“Yes,” agreed Miss Withers. “Everybody knew that Buck Keeley was in town making threats. That’s just the trouble.” She saw the bewilderment on Piper’s face. “Oh, I don’t say that I can prove Keeley didn’t do it. Maybe he did, although his sister claims Buck was having a brawl with some of the other cowboys and an officer at that moment, three blocks away from the scene of the murder.”

“Sure she does. And Carrigan and the cowboys swear now that Keeley was with them. Only if you remember they talked differently when we first went to the Rodeo. Then Rose Keeley insisted that Buck was with her at dinner in the hotel, and the boys bore her up.”

“Maybe they were lying then because they thought Buck was being arrested for something in connection with the fight?” Miss Withers shrugged her shoulders. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. Oscar, I said that I was going ahead on this case as a free lance, to show you that a woman can be a sleuth. But I’ve got an idea that will take your official position to work out. Forget poor Buck Keeley, and look at these.”

She passed a book across the desk to the Inspector, who stared at it blankly. “Toby Tyler, or Ten Weeks with a Circus—by James Otis. Thirty-fourth Printing.” He looked at her. “So what is this, another Peter Rabbit?”

“Look at the flyleaf,” she suggested. “It happens to be a grand old classic among children’s books, but I suppose you never read anything but Deadwood Dick when you were at the right age for it.”

The Inspector looked at the flyleaf, and raised his brows. “To Laurie from Lew, Xmas, 1921.” He nodded. “So you’ve been up at the Stait house again, have you? Well, what am I supposed to deduce from this, except that the twins used to exchange presents under the Christmas tree in a happier day than this?”

“Maybe nothing, maybe a great deal,” Miss Withers informed him. “Notice anything about the writing?”

He looked at the flyleaf again. “Sort of a childish scrawl, but that’s not so strange. Laurie and Lew Stait were hardly twelve years old then. Even the ink has faded out to a sort of dull brown. But as for any meaning ...”

Miss Withers gave him exhibit B. It was the note from Lew Stait to his young wife, the note which Miss Withers had lifted from the mirror in the bedroom at the Stait house that morning.

“It’s not the context I’m interested in,” she announced. “Though that’s at least revealing. If that young man went down to the apartment after the engagement ring his wife somewhat absent-mindedly left there, he had his trip for nothing. But apart from that, does anything strike you about these two handwritings?”

“I’m no handwriting expert,” the Inspector insisted. “They look alike, if that’s what you mean. I suppose that a man’s writing changes with the years.”

“I’m no expert either,” Miss Withers said coldly. “And therefore I think we’d better call in one. In this book inscription we have a genuine sample of Lewis Stait’s writing before the murder, and in this note we have a sample of his writing after the murder.”

“But why all this interest in Lew Stait’s handwriting? This isn’t a forgery case!”

“Maybe it is,” Miss Withers told him solemnly. She hesitated as if about to take the plunge.

Then she thought better of it. “Oscar, I don’t want to explain yet I want you to submit these samples of handwriting to the best expert you know, and ask him if they are actually written by the same person. Perhaps it isn’t possible to tell, but I understand that they can do wonderful things with a microscopic enlargement. Will you get the expert for me?”

“Of course, of course, if you think it means anything. I suppose you’re trying to see if Lew Stait’s early handwriting shows any traces of homicidal mania, or some such silliness. But I’ll send them out to our expert, never fear.” He pressed the buzzer on his desk.

“How soon will he make a report?” Miss Withers was anxious.

“He happens to be a ‘she,’” Piper informed her. “Mrs. Korn has officiated as technical witness in many a forgery and fraud case, and she can spot a poison pen letter a mile away. She lives over in Jersey somewhere, but I’ll have a messenger take these to her and bring back the reply within a few hours. If there’s any secrets hidden away in Lew Stait’s childish scrawl or in his note to lovey-dovey, Lolly Korn will ferret them out, even if she is bed-ridden.”

He handed the exhibits to Sergeant Taylor, with, brief and explicit instructions. Then he relit his cigar. “You needn’t sit back and look like the cat who swallowed the canary, Hildegard.”

Miss Withers was wearing a self-satisfied smile. “I have a feeling that this case is going to be settled, and settled soon,” she ventured.

The Inspector agreed, heartily. “Give me a couple of hours with this Buck Keeley, and I’ll have a signed confession to the Stait murder,” he promised. “I wish they’d bring him in. The boys must have picked him up in a wheelbarrow instead of the wagon.”

But before the Inspector’s cigar had gone out again, he heard the wail of a siren, and then a somewhat disheveled-looking young man was brought up the hall. His clothes gave evidence that he had slept in them, and slept none too well at that. There was a bristle of beard on his face, and his small, piglike eyes held an expression of injured innocence which was alien to his hangdog air and the manacles which adorned either wrist.

On each side of the stocky westerner loomed the tall blue figure of a uniformed policeman, and in the rear Mike McTeague strode along in plain clothes, with one hand on the holster which bulged under his coat.

“And here’s your roughneck,” announced McTeague breezily. The Inspector, standing in the door of his inner office with Miss Withers behind him, shook his head.

“Mike, who do you think you’re arresting, Terrible Tommy O’Connor? Take those bracelets off him.” McTeague rattled his keys.

“Where did you pick him up?”

“Down in the Municipal Lodging House, sir. He was there on the bum, with a hundred bucks in his pocket. One of the bums saw his wad, and when he couldn’t lift it he squealed and they ganged up on him. That’s how it came out.”

“I see. Well, Keeley, you see it’s no good.” The Inspector’s voice was calm and gentle. He might have been a father-confessor. “Don’t you think you’d better tell us all about it?”

Buck Keeley raised a whiskery but pugnacious jaw. “Tell you all about what? Am I here under arrest?”

Inspector Piper shook his head. “Of course not. We just wanted to ask you a few questions, and the boys were a little overeager, that’s all.”

“I’m answering no questions, and I’m leaving right now,” objected Buck Keeley. But he did not get far.

“In that case we’ll exercise our privilege and hold you over night as a suspicious character associating with known criminals,” the Inspector told him. “But I hope it won’t be necessary. I’m sure you’ll be able to explain everything satisfactorily, including the reason why you slipped up and used one of your own ropes to bump off Laurie Stait.” Piper turned to the two uniformed men. “Take him down the hall boys, and I’ll be there in a minute. Make him comfortable.”

Buck Keeley muttered a word worthy of old Mrs. Stait’s parrot in his more bawdy moments, and then went down the hall without offering resistance.

“He’s going to be easy,” the Inspector promised Miss Withers. “You watch me. Wait here and I’ll be back with a confession before you can say Jack Robinson.” Then he, also, went down the hall.

The hands of the clock crawled on toward noon, swung past the meridian and down on the afternoon side. And still the Inspector did not

show up with his confession.

When he did arrive, coatless and tie-less, he was mopping his brow. He poured himself something that may have been water from a carafe on his desk, and then shook his head at Miss Withers.

"I stopped saying 'Jack Robinson' because I lost count," she informed him acidly. "It would seem that you overestimated the third degree. Another hour and Buck Keeley will have *you* signing a confession of the murder."

"He's stubborn, all right," Piper agreed. "I've worn out a couple of my best detectives on him, and there's a new shift shooting questions at him now. He's a pigheaded sort, the kind of a mug who fixes a story and then sticks to it."

"I don't suppose it occurred to you that his story might possibly be true?"

"It can't be," Piper told her. "He claims that he tried to hide out only because he knew he'd be blamed for the bumping. And he says that at the hour of the murder he was having a fist-fight with a cop on Forty-fourth Street."

"Well? Couldn't he have?" Miss Withers was thoughtful. "Why don't you have the policeman in here to identify him? Kehoe ought to recognize the men who gave him that beautiful black eye."

"I thought of that," confessed the Inspector. "And I tried it. But identifications aren't always sure fire, you know. There was a case only a few months ago when we nearly sent a little punk to the Hot Squat up the river because he looked a lot like Two-gun Crowley, and happened to be in the courtroom when witnesses to a hold-up were pointing out who they imagined had done it. Well, that's the way it was with Kehoe. We had him down here about an hour ago, and walked Keeley down the other corridor with five court attaches, so Kehoe could get a flash at him. But what does that dumb Irishman do but pick out the City Recorder of Deeds, who happened to be passing through, as one of the guys who had socked him in the fist-fight and *then* had a drink with him afterward! So what does it prove?"

Miss Withers nodded, thoughtfully. "You say they had a drink together?"

"Yeah. Of course Kehoe didn't tell me that, but the Rodeo manager, Carrigan, did. As far as that goes, I'd rather a cop would have a drink with a citizen now and then, than arrest everybody he brushes up against. The

court calendar is full enough as it is, and the less arrests the better. Only of course I couldn't tell Kehoe that, for the sake of discipline."

He suddenly clapped his fist against his palm. "I've got it! I'll bet you that the whole thing was a frame. The fight and all that was faked, in order to furnish Keeley with an alibi. He got his friends to pull the thing, and then swear he was there, only it went askew somehow."

"You'd have got further with the identification stunt if you'd walked a squad of policemen past Keeley, and had him point out the one he'd taken a sock at," Miss Withers suggested. "He's no prize, but I think he's smarter than Kehoe. All the same, I hate to think of you poor policemen wearing out yourselves in a third degree, so I'll offer a suggestion." And she did.

The Inspector nodded, slowly. "Not a bad idea. A damn good idea. If the guy can be reached ..."

He seized the telephone, asked to be connected with a certain office in the Criminal Courts Building. "Hello, Max? Got something right up your alley. Tell me, what speakeasies are there on West Forty-fourth Street?"

There was a pause. "No, no, I don't mean that. Just in one block, say within a few doors of the Hotel Senator, on the south side of the street not far from Fifth Avenue." He began scribbling. "Okay. Thanks."

"Well, this ought to settle Buck Keeley's hash, one way or the other," he told Miss Withers. He reached for the phone again.

By the time Miss Withers and the Inspector had finished a sketchy luncheon consisting of ham sandwiches and malted milks, the scene was set.

"You've never seen the morning line-up, have you Hildegard?" He opened the door of a large room on the top floor of the building. "Well, it's the only place large enough for what we plan to try, so we'll have a little line-up of our own. At eight o'clock every morning all the previous day's arrests are paraded along that platform there, where you see the horizontal lines, with the floodlights on them. In these chairs sit the plain-clothes men, and a few uniformed men on special duty, getting a slant at the bright and smiling faces of the lads they're going to meet up with later in the course of duty. It's a great invention. Now you sit here in the front row, and I'll be back with the boys."

Evidently the Inspector routed out every plainclothes operative, desk clerk, and innocent bystander in the building. The chairs were soon filled, and the crowd awaited the show, whatever it was. Behind her was Buck

Keeley, between two guards. Miss Withers realized that she was the only woman there, but nobody else seemed to think it strange.

At that moment the Inspector appeared in the doorway, talking affably with a small gentleman who wore a derby crammed down upon his cauliflowered ears. "I'll consider it a great favor, Mr. Ellinson," he was saying.

"Just call me Moe" said Mr. Ellinson cheerily. Then he saw the brightly lit platform with its tell-tale black lines against the wall, and recoiled noticeably.

"I ain't going to get up on there for nobody," he announced. "A favor I'll do for you, Inspector, but I'm no crook and I'm not going to be mugged."

"Wait a minute, Moe. I just want you to pick out one or more of the men whose faces you recognize in this crowd. It won't take a minute."

"Sure I'll pick 'em out," agreed Moe Ellinson. "But I don't get up on that platform. I've got an honest business, Inspector. I run a speakeasy, not anything illegal. Ask anybody on Forty-fourth Street if I'm not on the level."

He scratched his head. "Tell you what I'll do, Inspector. I couldn't see anything from that platform anyway. But you walk the gents across it, and let me stand here, and I'll pick out the one you want. Agreeable?"

It was definitely not agreeable to the crowd. But the Inspector was pleadingly insistent. After all, they were all friends here, he said. And Mr. Ellinson was doing the Police Department a favor ...

So, after much argument, it was settled. Moe Ellinson remained in the shadow of the door, beside the Inspector, and a line of gentlemen filed across the stage, most of them looking particularly self-conscious and silly. The Inspector realized for the first time how extremely criminal some of his aides looked when seen under these conditions.

"You don't think you'll have any trouble in recognizing him?" he said to the little man in the derby.

"I run my business by recognizing faces, right off the bat," pointed out Moe Ellinson. "This is between friends, Inspector, and I don't mind telling you that if I made any mistakes in who I let through that grilled door of mine, I'd be closed up quick. Once a man comes in my place, he needs no card to get there again. I remember him."

He was staring at the gentlemen on the stage. "Oh, hello, Mr. Hennessy. How's the sweet little wife? We haven't seen you around lately."

Chief-clerk Hennessy flushed brick red and moved off the stage. There was a scattering of applause from those in the confraternity who remembered that Hennessy had a wife out in Queens somewhere who could never under any circumstances be described as either "little" or "sweet."

Several more figures filed across the stage, and then Moe Ellinson spoke again. "How d'do, Mr. Wegman? I haven't seen you up at my place since the first of October. That check, Mr. Wegman, it was rubber. Thirteen dollars, it was ..."

Mr. Wegman, who spent his days in serving subpoenas, likewise betook himself off in a hurry. There were protests, and several gentlemen changed their minds about aiding Piper in his little experiment.

Miss Withers was enjoying herself. And then, all of a sudden, it was over. The last man had passed across the stage. Miss Withers knew that the Inspector was, as he would say, pulling a fast one.

Piper turned to Moe Ellinson. "As I explained to you, Mr. Ellinson, we asked you to come here because a certain gentleman in this room maintains that he came into your place for a drink with some friends on last Friday afternoon. You say you never forget a face. Which of the men who passed across the stage was that man?"

Moe Ellinson shook his head. "Some of the gentlemen are my customers," he said. "But I haven't seen any of them for a few weeks. Business has been bad since the depression."

Piper nodded. "Then you haven't seen the gentleman here at all? His name was Keeley, although you may not have given him a card to your place."

"Sure I've seen him," said Moe Ellinson easily. "But you tried to put something over on me. He didn't come up on the stage at all. The gent you mention came into my place with four others at about five-thirty Friday afternoon, and after he'd washed the blood off his face I served 'em up a couple of rounds of beer. Then they left."

"Can you pick him out?"

Every eye in the room was on Moe Ellinson now. He enjoyed the limelight.

"Sure I can pick him out for you, Inspector. The gent you're referring to just went up the aisle on his hands and knees, and he's going through the

hall door right now. Don't mention it."

Miss Withers whirled around, and saw an empty chair behind her, with two surprised-looking guards gripping empty air. Buck Keeley had given them the slip!

They started for the door, but the Inspector held them back. "My experiment has been a success," he said calmly. "Let him go, he's been handed a sure-fire alibi."

Miss Withers and the Inspector went slowly down the hall toward his office. "I said that my experiment was a success," he told her. "It was, from Keeley's point of view. But it was a flat failure from mine."

Miss Withers caught sight of the familiar face of Sergeant Taylor down the hall. "There's the report from your handwriting expert, Mrs. Korn," she cried excitedly. "Your experiment was a failure, but watch and see how *mine* turns out!"

The report from Jersey was brief and to the point. "Whether because they were written under different emotional conditions, or because of change or development in the writer, these two samples of handwriting differ slightly in obvious characteristics. But *beyond the shadow of a doubt* they were written by the same person!"

"I guess the day leaves us both right behind the eight-ball," the Inspector told her unkindly.

But Miss Withers was unconvinced.

XVII

The Finger of Scorn

MRS. WITHERS RETURNED TO the Inspector's office later that same day to find that worthy minion of the law bidding farewell to a group of gentlemen who appeared too indigent and uninterested to be anything but members of what is sometimes laughingly called "the Fourth Estate." Inspector Piper was talking.

"Just say that Buckner Keeley, Rodeo star rider, was arrested this morning on charges arising from the Stait murder, but that he was released *this* afternoon when he cleared himself of suspicion by the proving of a well-supported alibi. Will you print that, as a favor to me?"

There were several grunts of assent. "But look here, Inspector, it's not news if you discover that somebody *didn't* do the murder. There must be a lot of people in town who're innocent of snagging the candy playboy out of his go-cart the other evening."

"Yeah," another voice rose up. "This little story is all right, but my city editor says he has a bellyful of listening to announcements that an arrest is expected before nightfall."

"Is it true that you suspect Laurie Stait of having been the center of a smuggling ring?"

"Is it true that the twin brother's girl-friend is unable to account for—"

"D'you think this murder is the work of a homicidal maniac?"

"Will you announce ..."

The Inspector herded them desperately past Miss Withers and out into the hall. "I think that this murder and every other murder is the work of a homicidal maniac," he admitted. "Now scram back to your desks, boys. I'll let you know as soon as there is anything doing. When we get our hands on the murderer—"

"He'll have already cheated the chair by dying of senile dementia," suggested an irreverent baritone.

The Inspector came back mopping his brow. This had not been a notably comfortable day.

“All the same,” he explained to Miss Withers. “I had to release that story. We’ve nothing against Buck Keeley now, and the poor devil may as well know it. He probably thinks that he’s being hunted down with rifle squads, but he’ll read the morning newspapers in a few hours and find out it’s all fixed.”

“He knows it’s all fixed,” said Miss Withers quietly.

“You mean he waited here long enough to hear what Ellinson said before he walked out from between those two dumb flatties I had guarding him?”

“No, not exactly. But I saw him about half an hour ago, and I told him.”

Inspector Piper frowned. “You saw him? Where?”

“If you must know, it was up in his sister’s room at the Hotel Senator,” Miss Withers explained. “He was under the bed, with a revolver in each hand, and I was afraid he’d start shooting before I could explain why I came up there. But I talked first, luckily.”

“That’s good,” said the Inspector absent-mindedly. “Say, by the way. Just why did you go up there? How did you know he was there?”

“I didn’t know he was there. I knew his sister Rose was there. Remember our bargain, Oscar. I want to play a lone hand on this, because I’m pretty sure I’ve got a full flush—”

“You probably mean a full house?”

“Have it your way, Oscar. Anyway, I think I’ve got what we’re looking for. Only I can’t prove it, as yet. That’s why I went to see Rose Keeley. I had to ask her help.” Miss Withers leaned back in the easiest chair.

“But what in the world do you need Rose Keeley’s help for?” The Inspector did not conceal his amazement.

Miss Withers smiled enigmatically. “I needed her help in sending a telegram, Oscar. What this case cries out for is a character witness capable of making an identification. I sent for one.”

“A character witness for Buck Keeley?”

“Hardly.” And that was all the Inspector could get out of his co-worker. Finally she changed the subject.

“I came back here hoping to interest you in having tea with me somewhere,” she informed him. “You realize, don’t you, that we had hardly any lunch? I thought that there might be a place near here?”

The Inspector welcomed the suggestion. “Just around the corner is the Diavolo Rosso,” he informed her. “Best Italian food in the city, though it’s something of a dump outside. And the *vino* is swell.”

“Where I was brought up, out in Dubuque, spaghetti and red wine weren’t served at tea-time,” Miss Withers observed acidly. “Besides, so far as it is possible I try to observe the laws of our great, if somewhat depressed, nation. It’s probably a silly old-fashioned habit that I’ve grown into from trying to live as an example to the younger generation in my classes. I realize that I’m behind the times, and that while I’m in Rome I ought to burn Roman candles, but—”

The rest of Miss Withers’ little homily was drowned out by the skirl of the telephone.

The Inspector discovered that a gentleman named Waverly would like to speak with him on important business.

“Go ahead, put him on,” was the decision.

“Hello, Inspector Piper? This is Charles Waverly. You remember our little chat of last evening?”

Inspector Piper admitted that he did.

“You remember asking me why I considered the marriage of my sister to the surviving Stait twin as unfortunate?”

Again the Inspector assented, impatiently.

“Well, I thought you ought to know this. They had some kind of a dreadful row this morning, and my sister moved away from the Stait house. My prediction was right, Inspector.”

“Well, what if it was? Do you want to set up as a clairvoyant and give me as a reference? Go on, man. Why did she leave him?”

There was a pause over the line. Then—“Really, I don’t know. She won’t talk to me, Inspector. She won’t talk to anybody, she says. But she’s left her husband and moved back to her apartment in the Village and she says that she’s going to sail for Bermuda on Friday’s boat.”

“You tell her for me that if she tries to sail on that boat I’ll have her dragged off by the scruff of the neck,” Inspector Piper shouted into the telephone. “And you tell her another thing—”

“I can’t,” cut in Charles Waverly. “She phoned me to tell me what had happened, and hung up before I could ask her why. And she’s not answering the phone at her apartment.”

“She’ll do some answering for me,” the Inspector promised. And he hung up the phone.

Miss Withers listened in silence to what the message had been. “Why are you putting on your hat, Oscar?”

“I’m going down there and find out why Dana walked out on her husband, of course.”

Miss Withers shook her head. “It wouldn’t do any good, Oscar.”

“And why not?”

“Because she won’t be there,” the school-teacher informed him. “If Dana Waverly doesn’t want to talk, she won’t put herself in a position where she has to talk. She’s enough of a sport so that, even if she’s leaving her husband, she won’t say anything against him until this has blown over somehow. She’s the type.”

“But I’ve got to find out why she left him!”

“I’ve got an idea,” Miss Withers suggested. “You’ll have a terrible time locating Dana this afternoon, because evidently she wants to keep out of this, and she’ll know you’ll be looking for her. But I know where you’ll be able to find her tomorrow.”

“Huh? Where will she be tomorrow?”

“Mr. Frank Campbell is having belated funeral services for Laurie Stait tomorrow afternoon at two,” Miss Withers reminded him. “Dana is such a close friend of the family that she won’t dare stay away, particularly in the light of all the newspaper publicity that there’s been. She’ll appear at the chapel, certainly, even if she doesn’t go on out to the burial vault with the family afterward. Dana is the type who would consider that part of her code. Why don’t you seize her there, and ask your questions if you think you must?”

The Inspector nodded slowly. “Maybe you’re right, at that. I’d rather go to the dentist than to a funeral, but sometimes you can learn something even there. I suppose that even the old lady herself will leave her parrot and put in an appearance, she’s just the type to get a big thrill out of the party.”

He reached for his coat. “Come on, it’s late enough so we can pretend this is dinner, and you shouldn’t object to spaghetti for dinner. Let’s forget about sleuthing for tonight, and take in a movie.”

It was, as the Inspector pointed out next morning, a great day for a funeral. No funeral director could have arranged, or even imagined, a more fitting

setting for the last grim rites. Gray, ghostly clouds hung low over the temples and minarets of Manhattan, shrouding the city and cutting off the top of the Empire State Building as if with a pair of shears. Little, scudding winds through the storied canyons, chill and bleak, howling of a winter that was no longer a promise but a bitter actuality.

The threat of rain or snow did not deter the Inspector from showing up at Headquarters in accordance with his custom at eight o'clock, in time for the daily round-up. When this major social event of the day was completed, and the new crop of gangsters and auto-thieves and degenerates had been returned to their cells, he descended the stairs to his own sanctum.

Sergeant Taylor was on duty in the outer office. "Phone call just came for you," he announced. "Lady left a message—Miss Withers. She says she's expecting you to pick her up at one-thirty, in time for the funeral. She can't come down this morning because she has to go out to the school where she teaches."

"Huh? Okay, thanks." Inspector Piper broke out a new box of cigars, and busied himself for a while in trying to pry the first one loose.

The Sergeant poked his head in at the door. "Somebody wants to see you, Inspector."

Piper looked up, annoyed. "All right, tell 'em to wait. I'm busy." He went on digging until at last a cellophane-wrapped panatella leaped into his hand. He made a religious rite of removing the wrapper and getting the cigar burning well. Long ago the Inspector had discovered that his mental processes worked smoothest when his teeth were clamped hard upon one of these moist and aromatic bundles of weed.

At last he came to a decision. "Hey, Sergeant!"

Taylor appeared in the doorway.

"Sergeant, I got a job for you. It's a hard job and an important one. Take one of the boys and go pick up Lew Stait, wherever he is."

The Sergeant grinned. "That's not such a hard job as you think, Inspector." He stepped to one side and jerked his thumb toward the outer office behind him. "That guy who's waiting to see you says his name is Lew Stait. And he says he's in a hurry."

The early visitor was in a hurry, and likewise in something of a nervous state. He had neglected to shave, and his yellow hair was unkempt under his derby. He had not slept in his clothes, but that was because quite evidently he had not slept at all.

The Inspector did not offer to shake hands, but he pointed out a chair by the window, where such light as there was fell directly on the young man's face.

Stait pulled a newspaper clipping from his pocket and shoved it across at the Inspector. "I want to know what that means," he said.

The Inspector studied it. "COWBOY RODEO STAR WINS FREEDOM" ... it was a reasonably correct version of the statement he had issued to the press yesterday afternoon.

"It means just what it says. Why?"

"Because you've turned loose the murderer of my brother, that's why!"

"Nonsense." The Inspector shook his head. "Mr. Stait, we've proved beyond the possibility of a doubt that Buck Keeley could not have been the murderer of your twin brother. He's got an unbreakable alibi!

"Can't alibis be faked?"

"Sometimes. But not this one." The Inspector stared at his caller. "Why are you so anxious to see Keeley indicted? He didn't have any motive, did he?"

"Of course he had a motive. He was trying to force my brother into marrying his slut of a sister, although I swear to you that there was no reason under heaven why he should have married her."

"How can you be so sure of that, young man? Your brother was out at the Wyoming ranch and you were here in town last summer."

"I tell you, that makes no difference. I know that nothing happened which should not have happened. They were trying to marry that girl off to what they thought was a rich man. I'll swear it on a stack of Bibles."

The Inspector shrugged his shoulders. "I'd like to settle this case and forget it just as much, or probably more, than you would. But I tell you frankly, Buck Keeley convinced us of his innocence."

"But it was his rope!"

The Inspector rose to his feet and passed over to one of the glass cases which lined the wall, and twisted a tiny key into the lock.

The panel swung open, and he fumbled among the assorted weapons there until he found what he wanted. It was a coil of soft, light rope, bound at the end with blue silk thread. He drew it out from among the sash-weights and revolvers and stilettos which had been Exhibit A's in the important murder cases of the last decade and others slated for impending trials.

He threw the rope on the table under his visitor's eyes, and the young man drew back with a violent start.

"Pretty, isn't it?" The Inspector fingered the noose at the end. "This is what jerked the life out of your brother," he observed affably. "This part here cut into his throat. It's a bad death to die, hanging is. Worse than the chair, in some ways, they say."

He pretended not to notice the evident agitation of his caller, and passed quickly over to his desk, where he drew a second rope from a bottom drawer.

This also he threw upon the table, beside the first. "And now, since you want to know I'll show you just why we are sure Buck Keeley didn't kill your brother," he said roughly. "Notice this second rope? In the first place, it's more than twice as long as the murder weapon."

He pointed out the difference, and Lew Stait nodded slowly.

"The full length lariat was too long and awkward to use for that little job," said the Inspector heartily. "So the murderer cut it off, not wanting to have any more rope to conceal under his coat than was absolutely necessary. He cut it off, and then found he had to bind the end to keep it from unwinding ..."

The younger man fingered the end of the rope. "But this blue thread is Buck Keeley's special mark. He uses it to distinguish all his ropes and saddles and so forth."

"Just how do you know?"

"Why—because Laurie, my brother, brought back souvenirs of his trip out there. When he left the ranch he bought his saddle and spurs ..."

"And a rope?"

"No, not a rope. But he told me about them."

"Well, it's true that Buck Keeley used a blue thread to mark his riding gear and his ropes," the Inspector confided. "This longer rope here is one that he used in the Rodeo at the Garden. Notice the blue thread. It would take a laboratory expert to tell the difference in those two different threads, but one is common silk and the other is a silk-rayon combination sold only at the excellent notion counters of Mr. Woolworth's stores. In other words, the rope that hanged your brother was bound with thread that Buck Keeley would have had to travel across two states to buy. We have a laboratory expert, you see. What's more, we find that whoever bound the murder rope did an awkward and slipshod job on it. He wasn't a cowboy, Stait."

“Who was he, then?”

The Inspector didn't answer that. “Maybe you can tell me that?”

Lew Stait thought for a moment. “Maybe I ...” His jaw closed like a trap, and there was the gleam of a sudden determination in his eye. The Inspector guessed that his caller had made up his mind about something or other—a decision which had evidently been a difficult one.

“May I ask you one more question, Inspector?”

“What is it?” The Inspector had some questions of his own to ask, but he was wondering if this was the time to ask them.

“Tell me one thing,” begged the surviving Stait twin, as he leaned across the table. “Tell me this—your lady friend, Miss Withers, said something about Hubert's having an alibi for the time of the murder. You warned us not to discuss the case at home, and even if you hadn't the subject is such a sore one that nobody has mentioned it. Where was Hubert when my brother was killed?”

The Inspector considered for a moment, and then decided that there could be no harm in letting that secret out.

“Your cousin Hubert was at a movie with your Aunt Abbie,” he announced. “They left together, you knew that.”

“Yes, I knew that. But—let me think. Listen, Inspector, if you want to solve this case, break down that alibi! Hubert must have been involved ...”

“Why?”

“I—I can't tell you. It's ...”

“You're making a pretty strong accusation, young man. Your cousin Hubert had no motive for the killing, remember. He wasn't in love with the same girl as the dead man. He stood to inherit only after *your* death as well as your brother's. And he has the ticket stubs and your Aunt Abbie to prove where he was at the time of the murder. No, you're not in a position to accuse him. It might even make someone suspect *you* of murdering Laurie Stait!”

For some unknown reason, that remark struck home. “Me murder Laurie Stait?” The young man burst forth in paroxysms of laughter. He laughed until he was weak. The Inspector suddenly rose and left him there.

He spoke briefly to the Sergeant. “When this young man leaves my office, put a tail on him and keep it there day and night, see? I want him free for the funeral this afternoon, and if things break right we'll have our arrest for the afternoon papers tomorrow!”

He returned to the inner office to find his visitor in a new mood. Lew Stait was in control of himself now, and the Inspector realized that he had missed an opportunity in striking while the iron was hot. There was a rigidity about the disheveled young man with the yellow hair that told of his nervous and wrought-up condition. His eyes were narrow, and a vein throbbed visibly in his temple.

“Thank you, Inspector,” he was saying. “I’ve got an errand to perform now. If you want me you know where to find me.”

“If we should want to question your wife, do you know where we could find her?” asked the Inspector gently.

Lew Stait shook his head. “She’s gone. Do you blame her? So what matters now?” His hands were plunged deep into the pockets of his overcoat, and he was breathing heavily.

Then he whirled suddenly toward the door, as if making up his mind again. “I’ve got to get out of here,” he shouted, and then was gone.

The Inspector watched as the young man went down the hall, and saw a lounge in a brown overcoat detach himself from a pillar and stroll idly along behind him. Then Piper returned to his office, locked up the murder rope along with the other murder tools in his exhibition cases, and lit a fresh cigar.

Sergeant Taylor appeared in the doorway with a batch of mail. “On second thought,” said the Inspector cheerfully, “on second thought we may have that arrest in time for the evening papers.”

XIX

Alarums and Excursions

THE INSPECTOR AND MISS Withers sat in the shelter of a taxi-cab outside the funeral chapel, and watched the people pass from curb to doorway. It was not a big funeral, as funerals go. There was no blocking of the street with frenzied mourners, as at Valentino's last rites. No solid silver coffin bore the bones of this unfortunate man to his last resting place, for this was no gangster funeral. But the Staits were people who had once mattered in this rapidly changing city, and there were those who had not forgotten.

They saw figures prominent in the social and intellectual life of the city pass under the canopy and into the wide chapel, gloomy as a stage setting for the last act of Romeo and Juliet.

Here and again Miss Withers nudged the Inspector to point out the arrival of one or two of the figures associated with the murder investigation itself. Mrs. Hoff and Gretchen arrived early, the former clad in sober black but the little maid arrayed in a white coat of rabbit fur and wide net stockings as her contribution to the ceremony. Charles Waverly was there, in formal morning clothes. Miss Withers had a quick suspicion that he had even blackened his frivolous yellow moustache for the ceremony.

Then there came Dana, red-eyed and leaning on the arm of the buxom Bertha Doolittle. She might have been the widow, Miss Withers thought. There was a look in her eyes as if something she had loved was dead.

Last of all the figures in this panorama, and most theatrically imposing, was Gran—Mrs. Roscoe Stait herself. Wrinkled as a mummy, old as the mouldering horse and carriage which deposited her at the curb, the old lady scorned Aunt Abbie's proffered arm and stalked across the sidewalk to the door of the chapel. It might have been her first sight of the outdoors and the faces of her fellow-men in a dozen years, but Gran looked neither to right nor left. The poise which had stood her in such good stead on opera stage and in the court room did not desert her now. This was her hour, and she disappeared inside with a great rustling of mouldy silks. The Inspector turned nervously to see whether or not the naked parrot was

hopping down from the carriage door to follow her, but that, at least, was spared him.

"You aren't going in, are you?" Miss Withers wanted to know. He shook his head.

"It wouldn't look well for a member of the Force to intrude at a time like this," he admitted. "But I did want to get a glimpse of the arrivals, and we've got that."

"All members of the family are here except Lew Stait and Cousin Hubert," Miss Withers pointed out. "They're already beginning inside—I can hear the organ."

"I don't know about Hubert," the Inspector admitted. "Probably he doesn't like funerals, and I don't blame him. But I don't mind telling you that I doubt very much if Lew Stait will show up at all. It's a hunch of mine that that young man is trying at this moment to step out of the picture, and it won't do him any more good than it did Buck Keeley. And Lew Stait has no alibi that's worth a tinker's damn."

"Oscar," said Miss Withers suddenly. "I've got something to tell you. I know who committed this murder." There was a sudden lessening of the tension between them.

The Inspector grinned. "Of course you do. And so do I. I promised Taylor an hour ago that we'd have our arrest in time for the home edition of the afternoon papers. And I mean to—wait a minute, who's that?"

A boyish-faced usher in cutaway and striped trousers was calling something from the doorway. Then he came running across the sidewalk.

"Are you Inspector Piper of the Police?"

The Inspector pled guilty.

"Well, your office is on the phone and they say it's a matter of life and death. They want to relay a call that just came in ..."

"Get out of my way," Piper shouted, and sprinted for the doorway.

Miss Withers cooled her heels for what seemed like half an hour, and what was probably as long as five minutes. Then the Inspector came out, still on the run, and leaped into the taxi beside her.

"The Stait house—203 Riverside Drive—and step on it!"

The driver whined. "But mister, if the cops sees me ..."

Piper flashed his gold badge. "I *am* the Cops," he shouted unconsciously paraphrasing a *bon mot* of one of the less-fortunate Louies. And the machine leaped forward up Broadway as if shot from a bow.

“It was Hubert Stait,” explained the Inspector, hanging on to the strap for dear life as the taxi ducked a-round a truck. Miss Withers was all ears.

“He spoke so low into the phone I could hardly hear him,” continued Piper. “Says he knows now who killed his cousin, not only knows but can prove it. He’s scared green over something, and his voice quavered like an old man’s, but he’s game, Hildegarde. Says he’s at last got evidence that’ll convict the murderer—”

“And that is?”

“He wouldn’t say over the phone. Afraid he’d be overheard, I guess. But he begged me to hurry. I guess he’s afraid he’ll lose his nerve.”

“I don’t think that young man will ever lose his nerve,” said Miss Withers dryly. And her fingers slowly polished the already worn handle of her umbrella.

The taxi-cab skidded around a corner and then spurted up the Drive, passing red lights, ducking between oncoming cars, and otherwise giving Miss Withers a mild case of nervous prostration.

The State house came into view, gaunt and gloomy against the heavy gray sky. The taxi skidded to a stop, and Miss Withers glanced at her watch. It was exactly two-thirty-five—the trip from Broadway at 67th had taken something less than fifteen minutes. Miss Withers was of the opinion that this was a record for the distance. If it wasn’t, she was quite content to let the old record stand.

But the Inspector did not race up the steps as she had expected. Down the street he noticed the figure of a young man in a brown overcoat idly chatting with a doorman of a new apartment building. He waved his arm, and the man in the brown overcoat came running up the street.

“Sure the Stait twin is in there,” said Swarthout. “I tailed him around to four sporting goods stores where he tried to buy cartridges, and then he came here. About half an hour ago. Nobody’s been in or out. I guess he’s alone in the house—the doorman says that he saw them all leave a while back to go some place. Even the old lady.”

“You follow me,” ordered the Inspector. “Maybe Lew Stait isn’t alone in there. Come on, Hildegarde.”

He pressed his thumb against the bell, and waited. There was no answer. He pressed it again, excitedly, impatiently, so that the hall rang with sound, but still nothing happened.

The Stait house stood vacant and gloomy and bare, silent as a tomb. Silent as the new abode of one twin, Miss Withers thought.

“What’s wrong here?” The Inspector beat with the heel of his hand on me door. “Georgie, you duck to the back door. If it’s open, come through and let us in. If it isn’t, you stay there and don’t let anybody in or out. I smell trouble.”

He drew back, ready to try kicking in the front door, when it was suddenly jerked away from them, and the half-naked figure of a tall young man appeared, a big bath towel wrapped around him.

It wasn’t, as Miss Withers had supposed for a moment, Cousin Hubert. It was the surviving Stait twin, water running from his sturdy athlete’s body and forming pools on the carpet.

They had but a glimpse of his pale, startled face, and then their host made an effort to slam the door. The Inspector caught it with his shoulder just in time, and pushed through into the hall, his hand instinctively on the hip that had once borne a service revolver.

Miss Withers, scandalized but still game, hung in his wake.

“W-what do you want?”

The young man drew the bath-sheet more closely around his body, and looked desperately past the intruders as if he was planning to bolt for it. He was trembling, whether from chill or from fear Miss Withers could only guess.

“Come clean, Lew! Where is your cousin Hubert?”

“Hubert?” Lew spoke the name as if it was new to him. “Hubert?”

“Yes, HUBERT! Where is he?”

“I don’t know. Why should I know?”

“Quit stalling. We want to find your cousin.”

Lew drew a deep breath. “Why, you’ll find Hubert at the funeral, I guess. He must be down at the funeral chapel. Why not look for him there? I couldn’t stand seeing my own twin buried, but the rest went—”

He tried to lead them toward the door. “It’s on Broadway above the Circle,” he pointed out. “Only a short drive from here. Why—”

“You won’t get rid of us that easy,” Piper told him. “Come on, we’re going up to your cousin’s room.”

“But he isn’t there, I tell you!”

“How do you know?” put in Miss Withers.

The young man set his jaw. "I know damn well. I came home figuring that Hubert wouldn't have the face to show up at the funeral. I wanted to talk to him. But he's gone out, and his door is locked."

They were going up the stairs, the Inspector pausing on the landing long enough for Lew Stait to get into a dressing gown and slippers. The butt of a revolver showed in the pocket of the dressing gown. Piper snatched it in silence. He exchanged a long look with Miss Withers. They went on—the young man white and still shivering. Miss Withers noticed that his hands were shrunken with the thousands of tiny wrinkles that come when soaked too long in over-hot water. They were not attractive hands, to her.

Then the three of them stood outside Hubert's door. The Inspector rapped loudly, but there was no answer.

He tried the knob, but the door was locked. He turned to Lew. "Have you got a key for this door?"

The young man denied it "This is an old-fashioned lock," the Inspector observed. "I could pick it with a hair-pin—or any ordinary skeleton would open it. But we won't wait for that—"

He drew back, as if he intended to hurl his shoulder against the stout oak barrier, but instead he swung the heel of his right foot against the door near the knob, crashing it so that panels cracked and hinges screeched.

Again—and the door swung inward, disclosing the long narrow room which was Hubert Stait's bedroom and study. It was dim in the half-light of the winter afternoon, and there was a singularly musty odor in the air, which may have emanated from the rows of books which hung on both walls.

A clock on the mantel ticked monotonously, its slow beat pounding in Miss Withers' ears as she saw who was staring at them from a high wing chair near the fireplace.

It was Hubert Stait, but he did not seem surprised, or even interested, at their rude invasion of his privacy. He simply sat there, and stared.

"Hello, there!" said Piper, and there was a cracked ring in his voice. For somehow he knew that he would receive no answer to his greeting—knew, even before his fumbling fingers found the light switch beside the door.

As the overheads went on, everything in the room was suddenly white and glaring, with one wide black shadow like a bar sinister across the

carpet. That shadow was cast by the high back of the fireside chair in which Hubert Stait was resting.

His eyes, strangely naked without the habitual spectacles, were bulging in their sockets, and his body had been lifted a few inches from the cushion by means of a strangling cord which gripped the thick neck and ran up and over the high back of the chair.

On the floor beside his feet lay, face-down, a copy of “Le Côté de Guermantes,” its leaves twisted and crumpled.

The noose, which had pulled savagely at the skin of his throat, was made of a rope familiar to all of them. It was of half-inch hemp, which ran up and over the high back and down where it was knotted around one foot of the chair. That end was bound with blue thread.

Miss Withers looked at her watch, instinctively. It was five to three—less than forty minutes since the Inspector had heard this man’s voice over the telephone, imploring him to make haste.

They had not, for all their hurry, been quick enough. Hubert Stait was still warm, but he was quite completely and finally dead.

XX

The Spilling of the Beans

“AM I TO CONSIDER myself under arrest?”

The surviving Stait twin was dressing himself, under the eagle eye of two detectives from the local precinct station. The Inspector stood in the doorway, and behind him the old house bustled with ghoulish activity.

“You can consider whatever you please,” said Piper. “And my advice to you is the less you say the better.”

“I’ve told you the truth,” Lew Stait protested. “I came home here to have a talk with Hubert—”

“After scouring the town in an attempt to buy 44 shells for the revolver you stole from my collection of murder weapons!”

“What if I did? I didn’t get any cartridges, did I? I came home because I knew that Hubert wouldn’t be at the funeral, and when I found his door locked I came downstairs and took a bath. I thought it would calm my nerves.”

“You probably wanted to wash yourself clean of the stain of murder, like Macbeth in the play,” suggested one of the detectives, who prided himself on a literary background.

“You can’t get by with that story,” Piper went on. “I talked to Hubert on the telephone at twenty minutes after two, and we’ve traced that call from this house. You can’t tell me that he sneaked out of his room and used the telephone without your knowing he was here.”

“But I was in the bath, with the water running ...”

“You’ll have a hard time making a jury believe that, young man. You nearly got away with it, didn’t you?”

“Away with what?”

“You killed your brother,” the Inspector accused. “I always felt that your alibi that the little maid gave you wouldn’t hold water. You dropped a noose over the head of your twin brother because you knew that the girl who was engaged to you really loved him. But your cousin Hubert got wise

to you, and when you heard him telephone me that he had definite proof of the murderer, you sneaked up the stairs to his room—didn't you?"

Lew Stait refused to talk.

"You concealed yourself in the closet, or in the corner behind the book-case. And when Hubert came back to his room to wait for my arrival, and sat down in his big chair in front of the fireplace, he thought he was safe. He thought he had a locked door between himself and you. He sat down in the big easy chair and picked up a book—and you pounced on him!"

The Inspector shoved his jaw almost in the young man's face. "The jig is up, Stait. You thought you'd inherit your brother's share of the property. You thought you'd cinch the girl you both loved, although that didn't work, either, because she got wise to you and left you a couple of days after you made her marry you. Oh, we're wise to you. You don't need to sign any confession.

"We know where you got the rope. Your brother Laurie brought it back from the west with him as a souvenir, along with the other cowboy paraphernalia. It was too long for the little strangling job you planned from the top of the bus, so you cut it off and hid the remainder of it somewhere in the house here. Then you bound the end *with* blue thread—the wrong blue thread, but you didn't know that—so that it would appear that Buck Keeley did the job. You knew he was in town and you knew that he was trying to get your brother to marry his sister, who was in trouble.

"Then Buck Keeley proved an alibi that took the wind out of your sails. And then your cousin got wise to you. Hubert had the brains of the family, I remember you told me that the first night I questioned you. But you didn't realize how true that was.

"So when he was sitting in that fireside chair up in his room you crept out of the shadows, probably in your stocking feet, and made use of the remainder of the lariat. You dropped a noose over his head as you stood behind his chair, and before he could move or cry out you drew it tight, throwing your whole weight on the rope. While he was dying you tied the other end around the bottom leg of the chair, and left him there. Don't try to lie now, Stait. The key to your room fits his door, we found that out. You locked the door and came downstairs. Whatever made you get the idea of taking a bath is a mystery to me, but all you murderers are crazy."

"I'm not a murderer, I tell you. If Hubert didn't commit suicide, somebody else killed him!"

"Suicide? There was no key in that room, young man, and the door was locked. Besides, a man can hang himself, but how can he tie the other end of the rope to the back of the chair he's sitting in? Hubert was afraid of you. He thought you might try to give him what you gave your twin brother, and you did. You'll burn in the Chair for it, Stait."

The boy's eyes were hunted, but he did not speak.

"Bravo, Oscar," came a voice from the hallway. "That's a fine speech, all right. Masterly statement of the case. Only it's all wrong."

There stood Miss Withers. She was holding a key in her hand. "I saw something twinkling out in the street, and picked this up. I think if you try it you'll find it's the key to Hubert's room ..."

"Aha! So he threw it away to try and make it look as if the murderer had dropped it!" The Inspector was facing Lew, who now stood completely dressed except for his necktie. He seemed to hesitate in drawing the noose of silk around his throat.

"But it won't work, Stait! You can't get by with trying to make out that somebody besides you and Hubert was in this house this afternoon. Because I've had a man outside since you came in, and he swears that nobody passed in or out since then, either through the back or front. You were alone with Hubert Stait, and you're going to pay for what you did to him."

There was the sound of something bumping on the stair. Miss Withers drew back in instinctive dread of what was being carried down to the waiting ambulance from the Morgue.

"That means that the photographers and the print men have finished," Piper announced. He stepped out into the hallway, and shook hands with an assistant medical examiner who was following the body downstairs. "Hello, doc. That was quick work. Anything new?"

Levin shook his head. "Pretty job of strangling," he announced. "You seem to run to those, Inspector. This beats the one we had on Fifth Avenue last week."

"You agree that it couldn't have been suicide?"

"I don't see any signs of it. He's been dead about two hours. Must have croaked about two-thirty ..."

"Five minutes after I talked to him on the phone," said Piper. "Oh, it's open and shut, all right. And this washes up the other murder, too."

“Which is a relief for everybody concerned,” agreed the doctor. “Well, I’ll see you around. Now that you’ve nabbed the wily gent in the bedroom, I suppose we’ll have a rest from stranglings for a while. Good-night, Inspector—’night, Miss Withers.”

He passed on down the stair.

“Well,” announced the Inspector, happily, “I guess this washes up the Stait Murder. I don’t see how you can maintain that my little resume was wrong.”

“Don’t you?” Miss Withers was restless, with an undercurrent of excitement. “Well, I’ll agree that this settles the Stait murder, all right. But there’s something else ...”

“That something else can wait,” the Inspector told her. “Well, I guess this case proves that the official methods can sometimes win out ahead of amateurs, huh?”

Miss Withers was thoughtful. “What are you going to do now, Oscar?”

“What am I going to do? I’m going to take this Stait kid down to the station and have him committed for the grand jury on the charge of strangling his twin brother Laurie and his cousin Hubert, that’s what I’m going to do.”

Miss Withers looked at her watch. “Oscar, will you wait about ten minutes?”

“Ten minutes? Why should I wait? I’ve kept him here an hour or two longer than was necessary because I wanted to stick around myself until everything was washed up. I’ve rushed things through so that I could get the body out of the house before the whole family gets back from the funeral of the other twin. The shock might kill the old lady if she’d come in and found the stiff here.”

“Wait a little longer, for your own sake,” pleaded Miss Withers. “I’ve planned a little surprise, and he’s on his way up here in a taxi now. But it takes quite a while to come in from Roosevelt Field. Oscar, this may make a tremendous difference, not only to your own career, but to the lives of innocent people. I can’t tell you any more, because you won’t believe me, but will you wait?”

“My dear lady, I can’t wait! Do you want me to miss getting this arrest in the morning papers?”

“There’ll be something in the morning papers that you won’t be caring for, if you make that arrest right now,” Miss Withers warned him. “I tell you

—stop, maybe that’s what I’m waiting for now.”

There was the sound of the front door being opened, and of low voices in the lower hall. The Inspector leaned over the balustrade, and saw what he had feared.

The Stait family, or what was left of it, was there in the hall. A harrowing ten minutes ensued, after which Gran was led upstairs in a state of near-collapse, Aunt Abbie on one side and Charles Waverly on the other. There were sounds of wailing from the kitchen, where Mrs. Hoff and Gretchen were playing the part of old family retainers, and one lone figure stood in the lower hall, dry-eyed, stiff, and somehow pitiful.

It was Dana Waverly—now Dana Stait—and Miss Withers could not forbear going down to her.

“I suppose you think it’s strange, my being here,” Dana said dully. “But I couldn’t help coming, unless I told Gran everything, and I couldn’t do that. She doesn’t know that we’re separated, you see.” She put her hand on Miss Withers’ arm. “Do you think I ought to go to—him?”

Miss Withers spoke a name. The girl drew back. “But—then you know?”

The school-teacher nodded, and put her finger to her lips. “I think you ought to go to him,” she said softly. “I think you ought to stay with him.”

Dana shook her head. “You don’t understand everything,” she said. “Oh, I’d believe in him in spite of all *this* if it weren’t for one thing ... the Unforgiveable!”

“There’s very few sins that the Lord won’t forgive under the right circumstances,” Miss Withers pointed out. “At least, so I was taught as a child. Besides, I’ve also heard that it’s better not to know anything than to know a lot of things that aren’t so.”

Dana looked at her, wonderingly. “I wish I knew what you mean,” she whispered.

“You will, before you’re an hour older,” Miss Withers promised. She heard a taxi-cab drawing up outside, and she knew who it was.

“You go up and see him,” she urged the girl. “He needs a friend right now worse than anything in the world. Maybe there’ll be two of you, soon.”

“I—I’ll do what you say,” promised Dana. And she ran toward the stair.

Ten minutes later Miss Withers came up the stair, a conspirator’s smile on her lips. She was risking everything on one throw of the dice.

She stopped in the doorway of the bedroom. The two detectives were staring out of the window, and Inspector Piper was jingling a ring of keys impatiently. A boy sat on the edge of the bed, and Dana knelt beside him, her arms pressing his head against her shoulder.

But he held himself rigid. "I know—I know you didn't do it!" she was saying.

He shook his head, mechanically. The barrier between them was too high for her to pass. Dana moved away from him, and he looked up at the Inspector. "Come on, get it over with, will you?"

"I'm afraid I'll have to," Piper said. "I've stalled around now for hours. Sorry, Hildegarde, but whatever you had up your sleeve will have to come later." He faced the prisoner again.

"Lewis Maitland Stait, I hereby place you under arrest for the wilful and premeditated murder of your cousin, Hubert Stait, and of your brother, Laurie Stait ..."

The Inspector's neat little speech was rudely interrupted. "Oscar," cut in Miss Withers. "Isn't there something in the law which says that no man can be convicted of a murder unless the *corpus delicti* is proved?"

He turned on her, rapidly losing patience. "Good God, Hildegarde! At a time like this—yes, of course there's such a law."

"And the *corpus delicti* means the actual proof that a crime has been committed, not only a crime in general but in this case a murder against a specific person?"

"Yes, of course. Any fool knows that ..."

"And if the police don't know the identity of the corpse they have no murder case?"

"Of course not. But—"

"Well," said Miss Withers triumphantly, "you'll get yourself into hot water if you arrest Lew Stait for the murder of Laurie. You're arresting the wrong suspect for the murder of the wrong corpse, Oscar. I tried to tell you, but you wouldn't let me."

"What in heaven's name are you talking about?"

Miss Withers didn't answer, but accusingly faced the boy on the bed. "That's *Laurie* Stait over there," she said. "Aren't you Laurie?"

The prisoner looked up at her and shook his head dully. "I've nothing to say," he told her.

“Nothing? Remember, I know everything, young man.” But he still kept his stolid silence.

Miss Withers drew the Inspector out into the hall.

“Explain yourself!” he objected. “I knew you had this crazy idea when you insisted that I send out the samples of handwriting to be tested. But remember what Mrs. Korn reported? That inscription in the old book and the note of Lew’s were both in the same hand!”

“I know. But there were other things, Oscar, which made me keep on the track. Listen to me now, before you make a dreadful mistake. Hasn’t it been clear to you that the living twin has been impersonating the dead one? They were *identical* twins, you know, and nobody could tell them apart but Dana.”

“Yes, but—why, the first night when we came up here we found the boy you say is Laurie monkeying around with the maid, which was supposed to be Lew’s idea of pleasure.”

“That’s true. But I’ve got a hunch he was already acting the part of his brother!”

“He couldn’t have known, unless he killed him,” said Piper.

“There might be a way he could have found out. But there were countless things. The missing wallets, for instance. You know and I know that the one identification most men carry is the card or two in their billfolds. Well, I don’t know how the dead man lost his, but remember I saw this boy in here go down the hall of this house that night to the cellar stair with something in his hand, and then we smelled burning leather? Well, he destroyed his own billfold, in case he should be searched. He wanted it to appear that he himself was dead.”

“Why?”

“Because he was afraid, that’s why. Probably of Buck Keeley, who had been making threats. Remember, the boy who was supposed to be Lew told us about what his brother had stared at *when he was alone*. And then Dana’s marrying him when she did—it seemed more likely that she’d marry the man she loved that way than the man she was engaged to and hated. But of course, she wouldn’t wear Lew’s ring when she married Laurie!”

“Suppose it is true? I don’t see ...”

“Wait. Don’t you see how it fits together? Lew, not Laurie, had a date for dinner with Dana that night, at which she intended to break the sad news to him. Lew, not Laurie, started off in the roadster to keep his date, driving

down Fifth Avenue. It didn't make sense, to me—the idea that Lew who had the date stayed home and Laurie who didn't, took the car out and got himself strangled in the street.”

“It's all a wild theory,” the Inspector objected. “Hildegarde, I've been very patient with you because I have the highest regard for your intelligence, but—”

“Then listen a little more. Can't you see what a chance this was for Laurie, the so-called 'bad' twin, to step into his brother's shoes, to be the babied one of the family, to have them aid him in marrying the girl he loved and who loved him? And at the same time he freed himself from whatever entanglements, real or fancied, he had with the Wyoming girl ... and her brother.”

“It's a wild guess, Hildegarde, as I said before. What difference does it make?”

“Suppose you arrest that boy in there as Lew Stait, and he is really Laurie. He'll be released, and you know it, because he'll prove his real identity. And you can't send a man to the chair for killing himself.”

“But how can you prove what you're saying? If you can, you've got an iron-bound case against our prisoner!”

“I thought I'd done it with the book I discovered,” Miss Withers admitted. “But the handwriting came out wrong. Laurie Stait was smart enough to realize that his handwriting might be tested, so he made sure that the only example of 'Lew's' writing around the house would be done by himself. He burned that Toby Tyler book, then bought another from Harpers and inscribed it to himself.”

“But the ink was old and faded ...”

“That's where the coffee came in,” Miss Withers pointed out.

“Remember how Mrs. Hoff took up two or three cups late at night? Dana and Laurie were experimenting to get just the right shade of faded brown. It's a perfect imitation of aged ink. I should have wondered when I saw that line on the title page of the Toby Tyler book—'Thirty-fourth Printing ...' but I didn't. Laurie Stait picked up somewhere a worn copy of the book, probably figuring that somebody around the house might miss the old one if it wasn't there ... but he got a much more recent edition of the old classic.”

“You make a good lawyer,” the Inspector told her. “But in spite of all you say, that boy in there has got to go to jail. After all, you can't prove whether he's Lew or Laurie. I'll arrest him as John Doe ...”

"I can prove it," Miss Withers promised. She opened the door of the bedroom again. Dana was walking up and down the floor, and the boy on the bed was waiting.

"Do you still claim to be Lewis Stait?" she asked him.

"Yes, I'm Lew Stait. Go ahead."

"You're not Laurie Stait? You didn't go out to Keeley's dude ranch last summer?"

He shook his head, angrily. "Do I have to stand all this? Why ..."

Miss Withers went to the head of the stairs. "Mr. Swarthout, will you go out to the taxi and tell Isidore Marx that it's time? He's the little Jewish boy with the red hair—just say Miss Withers sent word that he could come in." The door slammed, and she came back in the bedroom.

"I've got a surprise," she said calmly.

It was even more of a surprise than she had bargained for. There was the sound of the front door opening and closing, and then silence for a moment.

"Arrest me and get this over with," the boy begged. As he spoke there came a shrill whining sound from the lower hall, followed by the surprised exclamations of a little boy who called somebody a *schmutzick hund*, and the patter of feet on the stair.

A yellow whirlwind burst into the room, almost upsetting Miss Withers, who had been ill advised enough to stand in the doorway. It resolved itself into a big collie dog, still somewhat in the awkward age but already glorying in the fullness of a snowy white ruff and milky paws. A broken leash dangled from his collar.

His great plumed tail waved from side to side like a semaphore, and his nose wrinkled itself up into a snarling smile. He was making sure of his welcome. He took two steps toward the young man who sat, thunder-struck, on the bed, and then sniffed delightedly.

He gathered himself on his toes, and launched his body into the air, full at the throat of the single remaining Stait twin.

But the snarling whine was one of unaffected delight, and the great jaws opened only to let a long red tongue caress the face of the prisoner.

"Down, Rowdy, down!" The young man on the bed spoke without thinking.

"You see?" said Miss Withers. "This is a present from Rose Keeley, who is a little sorry for her part in this. We wired the ranch manager to ship

the dog air mail. I sent one of my best pupils out to the flying field to get him here as quickly as possible. And now does anybody doubt that this boy was out at Keeley's ranch last summer, and adopted this dog?"

Nobody did. Rowdy was in the heights, prancing around his newly-recovered master. Every second or two he stood up on his hind legs to place his forepaws on the shoulders of the boy whom they all knew now to be Laurie Stait. His nervous and delighted whine filled the room.

Laurie was stroking the silky head. "Rowdy, you've spilled the beans for me, old fellow." He turned to the Inspector. "Will you take me out of this? It doesn't make it any easier to see that pup, and know that I've got to go where I can't take him."

The Inspector nodded to his two aides, one of whom took a grimly-glittering pair of bracelets from his coat pocket.

At this point there was a considerable interruption. From out in the hall came weird and raucous sounds. "Here, here, here—sic 'em, sic 'em. Rats!"

Rowdy deserted his master and dashed through the door in answer to the stern summons, only to wind up foolishly in the hall. Above him, perched on the balustrade, was the dumpy figure of the naked parrot. Someone, in ministering to the old lady, had left the door of her attic apartment open.

"Sic 'em, boy!"

Rowdy ran in circles for a moment, trying to find out who was calling him. It was evident that he took no stock in the ability of birds as conversationalists.

"Hell's bells, boys. Belay 'em with a nine-tailed cat! Rats, Fido, rats! Skrrrrr, skreeeeeeeeeeeee ..."

Skipper relapsed into parrot language. The collie, suddenly realizing that he had been duped, returned to the bedroom with his ears drooping. He was shamefaced at having been taken in.

What he saw there made him forget all about the parrot, and spring to his master's side, white teeth bared and his eyes a pale smoky yellow. He sensed that the two men who approached Laurie, one on either side, were not friends.

The detectives, who were ready with their handcuffs, drew back. "Hadn't I better use the butt of a gun on the pooch?" one of the operatives wanted to know.

“You won’t need that,” said Laurie Stait. “I’ll go along without any fuss. All right, Rowdy, old boy. Lie down.”

Rowdy couched instantly upon all fours, ears cocked and his tongue panting.

His eyes were fixed on Laurie Stait with a world of love and admiration—something of the look that had been in Dana’s eyes when first Miss Withers had seen the young couple together. But she had done all she could for them.

“Take him down to the station, boys. I’ll be down there in a few minutes.” The Inspector looked at Miss Withers uneasily.

“It’s the only thing I can do,” he pointed out.

“Of course,” she agreed. They were standing in the hall, Miss Withers watching Dana’s struggles to hold the leash which kept Rowdy from following his master to jail, or anywhere else in this world or the next.

“I’ll keep him safe for you,” she had told Laurie before he went through the door and down the steps. He did not answer her.

Miss Withers faced the Inspector. “Where are you going now, Oscar?”

“Where do you suppose? I’m going down to the precinct station and see that Laurie Stait is booked for the murder of Lew Stait and of Hubert Stait. Why?”

“You’ve got the wrong man,” Miss Withers told him.

He shook his head. “You’re off the track for once, dear lady. Hubert and Laurie were alone in this house. Nobody left the place until we got here ...”

“Exactly,” Miss Withers agreed. “But afterward?”

“Why, I’ve got men stationed at both front and rear doors!”

“All the same, the murderer of Lew Stait—and of Hubert, for that matter—went out of here a little while ago. And you gave your official permission.”

“What? Why, nobody left this house!”

“Somebody did,” Miss Withers told him triumphantly. “Somebody left feet first!”

XXI

Somersault

THE INSPECTOR STARED AT Miss Withers. "Suppose you explain?"

"I don't know whether I can explain or not, Oscar. It's like the jokes in *Punch*, or the meaning in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. If you see it, all right. If you don't, there's not much use analyzing. This whole thing has been a warped, twisted sort of puzzle—a game that we had to play according to the rules devised by a madman. It's as if a chess opponent arbitrarily decided to have his castles move diagonally, and his bishops control the files. It's mad, every bit of it. As mad as the court scene in Wonderland, and evil as sin besides."

"I don't see all that," Piper told her. "I think you've let your sympathies run away with you again."

"I'm not letting anything run away with me, if I can help it. There's been too much running already, and not enough thinking. I want to tell you a story, Oscar, and when I finish perhaps you'll see what I mean."

Miss Withers sat down on a bench on the first flight landing, and the Inspector joined her, a dead cigar between his teeth and a deep wrinkle between his eyes.

"It all goes back to that Friday afternoon, Oscar. The afternoon when Hubert and Lew Stait—you'll admit it was Lew, now?—left Laurie in this house after a friendly cocktail and drove off in the Chrysler roadster.

"Lew was going to see Dana for dinner, without the slightest suspicion of what news she had for him. Laurie knew his brother was going, and so did Hubert. You take that as being incriminating for Laurie. Because he had a very apparent motive for wanting his brother out of the way. But wait!

"Hubert was going to the movie, and his cousin dropped him off on the curb. We have Aunt Abbie as a witness to that, for she was waiting outside the lobby. Hubert knew, and Aunt Abbie knew, just where Lew was going, and the natural route he would take. You'll admit that?"

"Of course I'll admit that. But I still don't see how you can involve either one of them in the death of Lew. They went into the movie, and Lew

drove on!”

Miss Withers smiled. “Of course! That’s what fooled us for so long. Hubert went into the movie with Aunt Abbie. Remember, she isn’t very bright, Oscar. She’s movie mad, and absent-minded besides. They found seats, and then in a moment Hubert excused himself and got up—ostensibly to go to the men’s room. He left Aunt Abbie engrossed in the picture, and —”

“And what? All this is mere guessing, Hildegard. Suppose Hubert did leave the theater. He couldn’t come out in time to catch his cousin in the roadster. He couldn’t reach across the city and touch a man who was miles away!”

“You forget New York traffic conditions at the rush hour, Oscar. And you forget the dirty weather of that afternoon, which always jams things up even worse. Lew wasn’t miles away. He wasn’t even very many blocks away, and whoever murdered him counted on that fact.”

“But I still don’t see how—”

“Wait. The Cinemat Theater is half a block from Carnegie Hall, where there’s a station of the BMT. Suppose a young man were to get aboard a subway train there, and get off at Thirty-fourth Street five minutes later. He could walk over to Fifth Avenue, take a north-bound bus, and still be far ahead of the Chrysler.

“He’d pick an open top bus, as I explained to you some days ago, hoping to be alone up there. But if he wasn’t, it wouldn’t matter so terribly. He’d be in the rear seat, and the whole operation wouldn’t take but a second or two. And the other passengers up on top would be with their backs to him, remember that.

“He ran a great risk, that murderer. Too great a risk to be sane. Because there were better and more secret ways of killing Lew Stait. But our murderer wanted the thrill of pulling the wool over the eyes of everybody. He wanted to feel that he was smarter than the world, and that he could murder his enemy on the busiest corner of the city.”

“How did this murderer of yours know that the bus would pass close to the south bound auto?”

“He didn’t, of course. Heaven only knows how many times he had tried it before, or was willing to try it again. But he knew that busses usually try to make time by keeping toward the middle of the street in rush

hour, and knowing Lew Stait's temperament he figured that the driver of the Chrysler would also be in the outer lane. And he was not mistaken."

"But the rope, Hildegarde! You can't tell me that the murderer had time to go to the Rodeo and steal a lariat."

"No. He had it wound around his waist, under his topcoat. And that rope, as I hinted before, was one of the trophies brought back from Wyoming by Laurie Stait. It hung in his room along with the saddle and the spurs. And it was where every member of the Stait family had access to it.

"So far so good. The murderer was crouched in the rear outside seat on top of that bus, and he knew that in the midst of that rush-hour crowd he was taking a terrible risk. And yet not as bad as it seems, for in that hurrying multitude everyone had to keep his eyes down to see where he was going. And so it was that only one person, the driver of the taxi far in the rear, saw what happened, or a part of it.

"There was a moment when the northbound bus swung past the southbound open roadster, and at that moment the murderer dropped his noose. The cast was not farther than ten feet, and he had been practicing. The contrary motion of the two vehicles snapped Lew's neck like a clay pipestem, and the murderer cast off the rope which had been caught around the rail of the bus, and let it go, body and all.

"Nobody would connect the body in the street behind them with the bus which sped northward. He counted on that, Oscar. I'll wager the murderer continued on his journey, all innocence, and only left the bus when he was well out of danger. Perhaps he even stayed on until the bus turned up Fifty-seventh.

"Then he bought another ticket—remember the extra red stub that you picked up out on the snow! That was where Hubert made his first mistake. He put the ticket stub automatically into his pocket and rejoined Aunt Abbie, and only thought of getting rid of it when he was almost home."

"But you mean to tell me that she wouldn't have missed him?"

"I doubt it. She's mad about the films, and the other morning, as I told you, she forgot whether she'd had her breakfast or not. Suppose she did miss him, I don't think she could tell whether he'd been gone three minutes or thirty. But wait—I think I see a little more light." Miss Withers pursed her lips.

"I've got it! Hubert—suppose for a while that it was Hubert—delayed a moment in a telephone booth before he went into the theater again. He

had to send the news to Laurie!”

“Then Laurie was an accomplice?”

“In a way. You see, it was all part of the plan. Hubert phoned Laurie that he had just learned—never mind how—that Lew had been killed by a lariat. Laurie, already in hiding from Buck Keeley, naturally thought that his twin had been killed by mistake for himself. Hubert played on that. And he pointed out that Laurie had here a clear way out of his own difficulties, a chance to switch identities and start over again. It must have been Hubert’s suggestion that Laurie try to ape Lew and make love to the little maid. He did it badly, and after that evening he didn’t fool her at all. Remember how she warned me that Lew had changed since the death of his brother?”

“Laurie has that respect for intellect, even for twisted intellect, that most healthy young morons have. He was in a panic, perhaps a panic that Hubert had helped to foment, and he clutched at any straw to rid himself of the incubus of Rose Keeley. Hubert warned him to get rid of identifying papers, and to say that his billfold had been stolen. Ergo, when a billfold marked Lew Stait was found in the dead man’s pocket, we were supposed to take that only as evidence that Laurie had borrowed his brother’s wallet.

“Laurie missed fire when he got rid of his papers, however. Because he didn’t have the heart to burn Dana’s letter. He sneaked past me to the cellar to burn his billfold and smell up the house with leather, but he hid the love letter under the kitchen table on his way down because it was precious to him.”

Miss Withers paused for breath, and then plunged on. “That letter, Oscar! Doesn’t that suggest anything to you? Remember what Charles Waverly’s stenographer overheard? Dana bragged about the love letter of hers that Laurie carried next to his heart. And that explains why no billfold was found on the dead body in the street.

“You suspected yourself, Oscar, that Charles Waverly was the man who identified the body. But at the same moment as he blurted out his identification in front of Doody, he realized the scandal that would ensue if Dana’s letter were found. For of course he thought the body was Laurie’s. Everybody took it for granted that if one of the Stait twins got into a scrape, it was Laurie.

“Charles Waverly did a brave thing, Oscar. He leaned over, pretending to listen to the dead man’s heart to see if there was some spark of life. I’ve got that much from Doody. But what he really did was to pick the corpse’s

pocket. Charles Waverly would do anything to keep his little sister out of a murder investigation. As soon as he got away and looked at the wallet, he knew it was Lew who was dead. But then it was too late for him to come forward, so he dropped the wallet in a mail box and kept his own counsel. For Dana's sake."

"What have you proved? What is there in this fantastic yarn you've given me that wouldn't apply to Laurie as well as Hubert—Laurie who had a real motive?"

"Only this. You forget that perhaps Hubert had a motive. If he killed one twin and the other died to pay for it, he was the next in line. But the motive lies deeper than that. I'm guessing that it was revenge!"

"Revenge for what?" The Inspector was becoming exasperated.

"The twins were everything that Hubert wasn't, Oscar. They were big and handsome and strong and cheerful and uninhibited. They teased him and rallied him and probably despised him a little. Remember what the maid said about the twins forcing Hubert to take up boxing and football?"

"It was the plan for the perfect murder, Oscar. But Hubert damned himself with one thing. I'll point it out later.

"We were supposed to arrest Keeley—free him, and arrest Laurie. The marriage and the handwriting test stalled off the evil day for Laurie, and Hubert began to worry. Then the police announced that Buck Keeley had been exonerated, and Hubert worried some more. Dana had left Laurie when she discovered why Rose Keeley was after him, but Laurie was discovering some things for himself. It was all right as long as he thought Keeley had killed his brother, but when he learned that Keeley had an alibi, and remembered about Hubert's phoning him about the murder when Hubert couldn't have known it honestly, Laurie Stait went berserk. Hence the stolen gun and his search for shells. He intended to kill Hubert. But Hubert was waiting locked in his room, for he had prepared for this possibility, too.

"The wise man is always prepared for possible failure. But Hubert was faced by failure on every side. He had matched his cleverness against society, and was losing.

"Ahead of him was retribution ... and the jeers of the multitude. Laurie was already suspecting him, and there was worse to follow. The Perfect Crime was a failure—almost!

“There was just one way, and Hubert Stait took it. Remember, he’s an introspective, abnormal type. He crouched behind the door of his room, and heard Laurie outside banging on it. He knew the jig was up—he had known ever since the notice appeared in the morning papers about Keeley’s alibi.

“There was just one way to make his deep-laid plan a success, and Hubert Stait took it!” Miss Withers paused, not only for effect, but also for breath. “Can’t you see?”

The Inspector rose to his feet. “It’s Greek to me,” he admitted. “You’ve made a great case of it, and you’re better than any lawyer Laurie Stait can get to save his neck. But so far you haven’t offered a word of definite proof. And you ask me to believe that a man committed suicide for spite. And what’s more, committed suicide by an impossible method.” The Inspector shook his head. “Show me how a man can sneak up behind his own chair and strangle himself, and I’ll release Laurie Stait.”

“He’s as good as released,” Miss Withers said slowly. “Lend me one of your men who’s about Hubert Stait’s height, will you? We’ll now make an attempt to run the film of Hubert’s exit from this world in reverse.”

The Inspector called down the stair. “Send Swarthout up here, Sergeant.”

The Inspector and Miss Withers stood once more before the room which had been Hubert Stait’s. Nothing had been touched, except the removal of the body itself, of course. A big copper leaned against the door post and chewed Juicy Fruit, noisily.

As soon as the young man entered the room, Miss Withers directed him to the murder chair, which still cast its bar of sinister shadow across the polished floor. The noose lay nearby, on the same table with Hubert’s glasses.

“Put that around your neck,” ordered Miss Withers.

Swarthout hesitated. “Hurry up, it won’t bite you!”

“It bit somebody else this afternoon,” the young man reminded her. But he gingerly dropped the noose over his own neck.

“Now stand behind the chair and tie the end of that rope around the lower leg, as it was before.”

Swarthout knelt down, and made the rope fast. Then he stood up for as far as the rope’s length would let him. His shoulders came just above the high back of the chair.

“I’ll have nightmares tonight,” he complained.

“Never mind nightmares. Let me see. I’ve got an idea how this thing could be worked. All right,” she nodded. “Take off the noose, but remember just how much leeway it gave you.”

Georgie Swarthout slipped the rope from his neck with a certain understandable alacrity.

“Now stand as you were before, when the rope was stretched tight between your neck and the leg of the chair,” instructed Miss Withers. “Now! Is it possible for you to rest your chin on the back of the chair there and then give a kick with your legs and a lift with your hands ... over the back and down into a normal sitting position?”

Swarthout was of the opinion that he was not enough of an athlete. Then, in deference to the Inspector’s nod, he gave a tentative heave.

His body, pivoting against the chair back, made a complete circle in the air, feet whirling after him, and came down with a thud in the cushion of the chair, disheveled but sound. His heels dug into the floor as they struck.

The Inspector knelt to examine the floor beside them, and his square thumb explored two other, corresponding gouges that were there. He nodded, thoughtfully.

“There are easier ways to sit down,” Swarthout announced.

“The man who invented that method didn’t pick it for its ease,” Miss Withers told him. “Notice, Oscar, that the noose is about six inches above his neck, now? Suppose a man turned that somersault with the rope around his neck? He’d come down just like this, but with his weight six inches off the seat, and he’d strangle slowly but surely. The appearance of the thing would make it appear that somebody had strangled him in his chair. And that was what he wanted!”

“Somebody?”

“Laurie, of course. They were alone in the house. Hubert had failed in his previous attempts to implicate Laurie. The story about the knife and pillow, and so forth. He was resolved not to fail now. He crept out of his room, while Laurie was running a bath to quiet his nerves, and phoned you. Then, confident that you’d come post haste, he went back to his room, locked himself in and threw the key out of the window, and prepared the scene. The book was supposed to signify that he was reading when it happened. But he had to take off his glasses at the last minute, or they’d have been crushed against the top of the chair as he started the somersault.”

“Now I know you’re crazy,” the Inspector burst in. “Why, you can’t make me believe that a man intent on suicide would care about his glasses.”

“No? Men have hanged themselves before, but few men care for jagged splinters of glass forced into their eyes as they die. Besides—wait, Oscar. Suppose he didn’t commit suicide!”

“That’s what I’m telling you ... Laurie killed him ...”

“Nonsense. Laurie couldn’t have killed him. I’ll show you why in a moment.” Miss Withers removed her spectacles and polished them furiously, as if thus to see better into the workings of this dead man’s mind.

“Oscar, there’s a queer twist to this that just occurred to me! Did you tell Hubert, over the phone, where you were at the time?”

“Why, yes, I did ...”

“Well, then! Hubert knew that you were at the funeral parlors, and that you’d come up here on the double-quick. He knew that you weren’t more than fifteen minutes away—and Oscar, he knew that it takes almost half an hour to strangle!”

“But I don’t see ...”

“Wait! Even if the murderous attack supposedly made on him, by Laurie, who was the only other person in the house at the time, turned out to be unsuccessful, it would still damn Laurie, wouldn’t it? It would point out that Laurie had killed his twin, too, because the job would be done with the missing half of the murder rope! Don’t you see, Oscar? Hubert gambled with his life, but he hedged his bet!”

“You mean he expected us to get here in time to cut him down?” The Inspector whistled, silently. “Then he forgot to figure on my stopping to talk to the operative I had stationed outside!”

“You may go to the head of the class,” Miss Withers told him.

XXII

Fanfare of Trumpets

THE INSPECTOR MADE ONE last weak effort to support his own broken lines of defense.

“Admitting all this,” he objected. “You say you’ve got definite proof of the innocence of Laurie Stait? If you have, I don’t see what it can be. Even if you prove Hubert’s death a suicide, or a pretense at suicide, that still doesn’t necessarily clear Laurie of suspicion in the death of his brother.”

“I’ll take your second point first,” Miss Withers explained. “The rope in my hands, the fragment of a lariat used to choke the life out of Hubert Stait, is part of the same rope that killed Lew Stait. What’s more, it’s got the genuine blue thread on the end, where the other had a faked version. Notice how the binding is smooth and even and expert here? And the thread is silk, not rayon. Where did Hubert get this rope? Where he’d had it hidden since he used the rest of it to kill Lew! If he could lay hands on it whenever he wanted to, even you won’t try to maintain that he was innocent of the murder of Lew.

“But never mind that. You ask me how I know Laurie had no complicity in the death of Hubert? I’ll tell you.”

Miss Withers tossed the noose across the room, and presented a firm palm to the Inspector. “Look at my hand, Oscar.”

He looked at her hand. “So what?”

“Oscar, did you ever take a bath and soak and soak for a long time?”

“Are you insinuating—”

“Not at all. But you take showers, don’t you? Cold ones? You’re just the bustling type who would. All right, but I used to take hot baths, before I learned that while it steadies your nerves it plays havoc with your energy.

“When we got here, just a little less than half an hour after Hubert’s phone call, we found Laurie steaming from the bath tub. He was dripping wet, you saw that. But did you notice his hands?”

“Why should I?”

“After about twenty minutes or more in sudsy hot water, your hands get all wrinkled and water-soaked as the blood leaves them. It happens when I wash dishes, Oscar. It doesn’t happen when you read in the tub, because the hands have to be immersed continuously for some time. Well, therefore I knew that since Laurie’s hands were all water-soaked, he couldn’t have just come downstairs from finishing off his cousin. And there wasn’t time for him to have strangled Hubert before he took the bath, Oscar.”

She paused, weary but triumphant.

“That’s the weirdest alibi I’ve ever run across,” agreed the Inspector slowly. “But I’ll admit it seems to hold water. You win a week’s salary.”

“It was something weirder than all of Hubert’s fantastic plotting,” Miss Withers insisted. “Now you’d better go let Laurie Stait out of jail.”

Miss Withers and the Inspector came slowly down the stairs of the Stait mansion. “Look there!” The Inspector caught his companion’s arm and pointed toward the open door of the living room. It was already evening, but Dana Waverly had not troubled to turn on the lights. She sat there, staring into the empty fireplace.

Close beside her, with his white muzzle resting on her knee, stood Rowdy, the collie. Except for him, she was alone. Her brother Charles had long since gone away, after expressing his wonder and disgust at her remaining in this house. Aunt Abbie and the two servants were up in the attic with old Mrs. Stait. The old lady had accepted the death of Hubert with much the same calmness as she had met the news about Laurie’s supposed death, but she was much perturbed over the wetness of the day in which she had had the temerity to go out of doors, and the consequent danger to what was left of her voice.

Dana sat alone, her profile white and marble-like in the gloom. “You tell her,” whispered the Inspector. “Go ahead, you’ve earned it, Hildegard. Go on and tell her that her husband is free.”

But Miss Withers shook her head. “I’ll do nothing of the kind,” she said. “There’s only one person she’ll want to hear that news from, Oscar. It may be cruel to keep her suffering another half hour, but it will be all the more wonderful when her lover tells her. Come on, we’ve got to get down to the station house.”

They paused in the lower hall, but Dana did not look up. Rowdy, unsure as to whether these were friends or foes, waved the plume of his tail

inquiringly, and then took his cue from his new-found mistress. If she had no greeting for these strangers, he would show them the supercilious stare of which only a pedigreed collie is capable. Rowdy pretended not to notice them at all, and he sniffed, audibly.

His demonstration of poise was spoiled, suddenly, by a raucous interruption. "Here, boy, here! Sic 'em! Rats, boys, rats!"

Impulsively plunging to obey the summons, Rowdy dashed by the two who waited in the hall, and bounded up the stairs.

Fast as his white paws moved, the centenarian parrot was faster. The obscene bird scrambled, by dint of using feet, flippers, and his enormous hooked bill, to the lofty eminence of a cabinet which stood on the second floor landing, whence he launched volley after volley of unprintable curses at the excited collie.

Rowdy, furious with himself for having been tricked again into obeying this strange object, made a few tentative leaps at the bird without achieving his righteous purpose, and then descended the stairs again, followed by screeches of derisive laughter coupled with expressions of disfavor which the collie pretended neither to hear nor understand.

He stalked past the Inspector and Miss Withers without taking any notice of them whatever, and returned to his place beside Dana, the stiff hairs along his backbone bristling. He watched them go without moving his muzzle from the knee of the girl. Rowdy knew that something was wrong, and he was ashamed of himself for having, even temporarily, deserted his post.

There was a great hullabaloo at the station house of the Twenty-fourth Precinct, on 100th Street. The Inspector, with Miss Withers close at his heels, forced his way into the crowded room. He was immediately set upon by reporters, court attaches, and idle bystanders.

"Is it true that Lew Stait has confessed to the murder?"

"Will you let us quote you as saying that you consider Laurie Stait as the cleverest murderer of modern times?"

"Inspector, will you pose for a picture?"

"Will you sign a story on the way you deduced the case?"

"Will you please take off your hat and let us flash you beside your prisoner?"

"Scram," answered the Inspector succinctly, and shoved his way forward toward the desk.

His arm was seized from behind. It turned out to be a hanger-on from the D. A.'s office.

"Mr. Roche wants you to phone him at once!"

"You can tell Tom Roche, for me, that he can jump in the East River."

"But he wants to know what it's all about. Who are you arresting, and for what? Some of them say the prisoner is one twin, and the rest of them say he's the other, and the D. A. is going batty ..."

"He hasn't far to go, if you ask me," the Inspector remarked.

"But Mr. Roche wants to know when you're going to have the hearing before the magistrate. He wants to be on hand. He ..."

The Inspector pressed closer to the bench. "Hello, Captain. Got my prisoner here safe and sound?"

"Sure have. And if I may say so, it's great work! I'm glad you got here, though. The prisoner won't talk, and there seems to be some question as to what his name is. Are you arresting Lew Stait for the murder of Laurie and Hubert Stait, or are you arresting Laurie Stait for the murder of Lew and Hubert Stait? I don't know how to book him." The Captain rubbed his nose.

"You don't need to bother," the Inspector informed him savagely.

"There is only one charge against Laurie Stait, that I know about. And that isn't exactly criminal. I'm withdrawing the charge of murder!"

The Inspector crooked his thumb. "Go on, get Stait out of the cell!" He turned to the crowd. "You newspaper boys can release a story saying that the Stait Murderer cheated the electric chair via suicide at two-thirty this afternoon. Now scam out of here, all of you. The only charge against the prisoner is the *ownership of a dog without a license!*"

It took a good deal of strong-arm work to get Laurie Stait through the crowd. "We'll run you home in a squad car," Piper told him when the first shock of surprise was over. "It'll keep the reporters off you, and it's the least we can do under the circumstances."

Laurie Stait was silent all the way home, although he drew into his lungs the over-chill and none-too-clean air of Manhattan as if he could never get enough of it. But there was still one dark cloud in his sky, and Miss Withers knew what it was.

"I guess you didn't understand what I meant when I said that Rose Keeley was making you a present of the collie because she was sorry for

her part in this business. I had a little talk with her yesterday, and she gave me this note to give you.”

Laurie took it as the squad car drew up before the entrance to the Stait house, and held the scribbled note in the light of the street lamp.

“Dear Mr. Stait: (it began) I’m sorry about it all. It wasn’t Buck’s fault, because I lied to him about who the man was. I was crazy to get away from the ranch and live in the east. But Miss Withers found out it was a put up job, and so I’m marrying Laramie White and going back where I belong. Yours respectfully, Rose Keeley.”

“Show that to Dana,” suggested Miss Withers gently. “I think it will make your reunion a happier one.”

Inspector Piper stared at his partner. “Will you tell me how you knew that?”

“Of course. Remember how at the Rodeo we heard Carrigan, the manager, wondering why Rose and Laramie had reversed their act, so that he shot at her instead of vice-versa? The act wasn’t as good that way, but Laramie wouldn’t trust her to shoot at him day in and day out ... and I knew there must be a reason. He had got her in trouble, that’s why. When he didn’t do anything about it, the girl got the idea of framing this kid here, and she convinced her brother that the honor of the family had been stained and so forth. But when she fainted that day at Madison Square Garden, Laramie White leaped to catch her, and I had an idea that things could be fixed up with a hide firm talking-to, and they were.”

“You’re a wonder, Hildegard,” admitted the Inspector.

But Laurie Stait had not waited to hear the details of how the plot of Rose Keeley had been exploded. He was running up the steps of the Stait mansion.

He thrust the note before the astonished eyes of the girl who was still staring into the fireplace, and then there was a long silence. It was broken, first by the roar of the auto outside which bore the Inspector and Miss Withers away, and then by the low growls of Rowdy, who had at last cornered the loathsome naked parrot in Aunt Abbie’s bedroom, and who proceeded to make short work of it, squawk and all, beneath the bed.

He confidently expected to be punished for the deed, but much to his relief the body of the thing was not discovered until, in company with his master and his new mistress, he was aboard a Bermuda-bound liner.

Turn the page to continue reading from the Hildegarde Withers Mysteries

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STUART PALMER

A
HILDEGARDE
WITHERS
MYSTERY



The Puzzle of the Pepper Tree



Cast of Characters

Phyllis La Fond. A vivacious blonde who's down on her luck and admits she'd do almost anything to make it in the movies.

Ralph O. Tate. A Hollywood director who's shooting a movie on Catalina.

Tony Morgan and George Weir. Mr. Tate's young assistants.

T. Girard Tompkins. A distributor of Catalina pottery, made on the island.

Thorwald Narveson. A Norwegian whaling ship captain.

Marvin and Kay Deving. Newlyweds honeymooning in Catalina.

Lewis French and Chick Madden. Pilots of the *Dragonfly*, a flying boat.

Miss Hildegard Withers. An angular, inquisitive schoolteacher with a talent for detecting.

Amos Britt. The jovial chief of police on Catalina Island.

Ruggles. His octogenarian assistant.

Dr. James Michael O'Rourke. The island's no-nonsense doctor.

Olive Smith. His pretty, capable nurse.

Roswell T. Forrest. There's a \$15,000 price tag on his head.

Barney Kelsey. Forrest's bodyguard.

Roscoe. The hotel's elderly bellhop.

Rogers. The hotel handyman.

Dan Higgins. A night watchman.

Mister Jones. A black and white wirehaired terrier.

Harry L. Hellen. A very determined process server.

Patrick Mack. A self-described businessman from Bayonne, New Jersey.

Inspector Oscar Piper. A New York City police detective and longtime friend of Hildy's.



CHAPTER I

THAT MORNING SAW THE mighty Pacific, in the guise of a chill and luminous fog, sweep in upon the arid valley of Los Angeles. It drifted up the slope of cactus-clad hills, obscuring alike the clean, serrated ridge of the northern mountains and the nearer gaunt skeletons of the oil derricks, and left only a greasy black ribbon of highway down which a Ford roadster flung itself headlong into the mist.

The lone driver shivered as the fog seeped through his light sport jacket. His plumply handsome face, over-soft from frequent massage, was gray with cold.

He glanced at a white-gold strap watch on his wrist and saw that it indicated fourteen minutes before ten. That left him plenty of time, unless somewhere he had taken the wrong turning.

No—he was all right. He jammed on the brakes as the mists ahead of him lifted a little to disclose the outlines of a mammoth excursion steamer, bearing at masthead and stack a blue flag with a large white “W” in its center.

The man in the cocoa-colored sport outfit knew this apparition almost at once for what it was—a tall billboard standing dead ahead at a V in the road. Above the exceedingly lifelike painting of the white excursion steamer stood forth a legend in scarlet—“Catalina Terminal—one-quarter mile—turn right,” and beneath it was the assurance, “In All the World No Trip Like This!”

With a screech of tires on wet pavement the little roadster swung to the right and was immediately swallowed up in the mist.

Ten minutes later the man in brown scrambled out of his car to stand a little foolishly upon a barren and deserted wharf. For the second time that morning he was seeing the outlines of a gay white excursion steamer through a curtain of fog.

On masthead and stack were the familiar blue flags with the big white “W”—but this time a wisp of steam followed by a tantalizing farewell blast from her siren assured him that here was no billboard, but the pleasure steamer *Avalon* herself, departing without him.

For some reason never explained satisfactorily by science, there is nothing more thoroughly ludicrous than the sight of a man missing a train or a boat, except, perhaps, a man losing his hat.

As if determined to afford his audience—limited as it was to idlers and a few longshoremen—the highest possible gratification, the man in the brown sport outfit whipped off his modish straw and deposited it before him on the dock, where he proceeded to leap upon it with both heels. His lips moved, as if in silent prayer.

A young man in blue coveralls detached himself from a sheltered spot in the lee of a cluster of piles and approached briskly.

“Park your car, mister? All day for fifty cents.”

The stranger removed his tan suede shoes from the wreckage of his hat, rammed both fists into the pockets of his razor-edged trousers of pinstriped creamy flannel, and finally found words.

He wanted to know what kind of a so-and-so steamship company this was to send out its so-and-so ships ahead of schedule. With unnecessary unction he displayed his watch, which still hovered a little before the hour of ten.

The man in the blue coveralls grinned widely. Then he raised his eyes to the big clock which was visible over the open doors of the garage end of the terminal. Here the time was represented as fourteen minutes past the hour.

“You’re not the only one to miss this boat,” he confided. “Lots of them get on the wrong boulevard coming down from L.A. or else set their watches by those screwy time signals that come over the radio.”

“I haven’t needed to set this watch since—in the last month,” insisted the man in brown. He pronounced it “wartch.”

He went on, his voice rising. “I’d like you to tell me why I should pay you to park my car *now!*” he demanded. “I ain’t going anywhere.”

“You can still hop on the *Dragonfly*,” he was told. A greasy thumb was extended toward the wharf at the right, where for the first time since his arrival the man in brown noticed a thick-winged flying boat rocking lazily at the foot of a slip.

“They always hold back a few minutes so as to pick up them as miss the boat,” went on the garage helper. “It’s only three-fifty fare—and you’ll be on the island two hours before the *Avalon*. ”

The man in brown looked down at the varnished newness of the red-and-gilt Douglass amphibian without visible enthusiasm. He shook his head. "You don't get me on one of those box kites again," he decided. "I'll wait for the next boat—when is it?"

"Same as always, ten o'clock." The man in the blue coveralls reached tentatively toward the handle of the car door.

"What? No boat till tonight?"

"Ten tomorrow morning," he was laconically corrected. "Plane's your only chance. Here's your parking ticket."

The Ford rolled smoothly in through the gaping doors of the Terminal Garage, while he who had driven it here pocketed his parking slip mechanically. Down beside the waiting cabin plane a young man in a white uniform surveyed him speculatively and swung a pair of goggles. Out in the harbor the mist was beginning to give way before the sea wind and the sun. There the man in brown saw the steamer, three decks loaded with pleasure-bent humanity, as she derisively swung toward him her high fat buttocks.

Be it marked down upon the Everlasting Record that at this crucial moment the belated traveler was seen to hesitate. Whether it was the sound of merry laughter mingled with dance music which drifted back from the departing *S.S. Avalon* or the crisp "All aboard!" from the pilot in the white uniform which impelled him to take the leap, no one will ever be able to say with authority. At any rate, the man in brown quietly and fervently kicked the remains of his straw hat off the dock and then hurried down the steep-slanting gangplank onto the slip.

Here he paused before a miniature ticket office and information booth, manned at the moment by a white-clad duplicate of the first pilot. This young man was somewhat officiously making entries in a ledger. His name, as attested by an "on duty" card beside him, was Lewis French, and the silver wings on his lapel had not yet dulled.

"It won't be rough up there, will it?" the would-be passenger wanted to know, as he put down a five-dollar bill and waited for change. "I was sick as a dog coming out on the Transcontinental."

"Fog's clearing," French told him. "Air hadn't ought to be rough. Anyway, the trip takes less than twenty minutes. We'll have you in Avalon before you have time to be sick." He proffered an official release-from-damages form. "Sign this, please."

With practiced fingers he tore off the stub bearing the illegible scrawl of a signature and put it with a sheaf of others in the tin cash box beside him. The rest of the ticket, together with a small envelope containing two wads of ear-cotton and three pellets of sugarcoated chewing gum, he handed to the man in brown.

“You can tickle her, Chick!” he called toward the plane. The pilot with the goggles waved his hand and popped through a narrow door near the tail fins.

French closed and locked the little office, handed up the cash box to an office boy who appeared suddenly behind the piling of the wharf, and then herded the last passenger across the slip and into the gently rocking plane. They stooped to pass through the door, though the man in brown was not by any means tall.

On their right was a cubicle for baggage, now well filled with overnight bags, cameras, and various impedimenta. From one of the cases, through a wire window, there sounded an appealing whine as they passed down three steps into the cabin itself.

Here were ten deeply upholstered seats of blue leather, five on each side, with only the narrowest of aisle between. Eight of the seats were filled. There was a strong smell of leather, burned gasoline, and gardenia scent, for the heavy plate-glass windows were hermetically sealed, and the pilot French had already slammed and made fast the single door behind him.

The man in brown made a quick survey of the situation in which he found himself. There were only two girls aboard the plane. The blonde in plaid, who was responsible for the scent of gardenia, interested him most. But she was sitting in the front seat on the left, with a bored, baldish man in riding breeches close behind her, and a dull, middle-aged person lurking behind a paunch and an elk’s tooth across the aisle. She would, he decided, have to come under the head of “unfinished business.”

With the decisiveness of an old campaigner, the man in brown chose the third seat from the front on the right, placing himself thus directly in front of the girl with the red curls. The usual pair of dark sun glasses obscured her eyes, but her mouth was pleasantly tinted in an orange that matched her hair and contrasted well with the blue of her corduroy trousers. The seat across the aisle was likewise vacant, but since it would only have placed him between the riding breeches and the slick young man with

whom the redhead was sharing a package of chewing gum, he never considered it for a moment.

It was not that his intentions were dishonorable, or even that he had any intentions, but just that, as he had often remarked philosophically, “You never can tell what’ll happen.” In this case he was quite right.

Pilot French made his way up the aisle, greeted a paunchy person in a front seat with, “Morning, Mr. Tompkins,” and paused in the doorway of the control room where the young man he had called “Chick” was already tickling the motor.

“All right, folks,” he said cheerily, his eyes paying a passing compliment to the blonde in the front seat. “In four minutes we’ll be looking down on Uncle Sam’s Fleet. And—you know what the paper containers are for.”

Phyllis La Fond moved her slim hips to a more comfortable position in the blue leather seat and arranged the skirt of her plaid suit so that her crossed ankles got the ace display position in the aisle to which nature and her last pair of four-dollar stockings entitled them.

She magnificently failed to notice the flare of interest in the handsome, bronzed face of Lew French, for all the glory of his new white uniform with the crossed wings. Phyllis had outgrown uniforms these many moons. Now she gave herself to a survey of her fellow passengers, her wide gray-green eyes staring insolently, lazily, beneath their heavy lashes.

There was something of the grace of a hunting panther in the poise of her body, something feline, mysterious, and beautifully sinister. What was in her mind we shall not inquire. It is enough to say that her worldly goods and chattels consisted at the moment of a five-dollar bill, a gold vanity case, a suitcase full of dresses and underwear, and a small black and white terrier.

She was intensely aware of the bored man in riding breeches and a turtleneck sweater immediately behind her, but she wasted no time on him. Across the aisle was Tompkins, the middle-aged, paunchy personage with the elk’s tooth. His hands were overmanicured, and his face a little spotty and choleric, but Phyllis mentally rated him eighty-five and passed on. Behind him was a massive man with so many freckles that they even dotted forehead and ears. His eyes, which were a bright innocent China blue, were fixed on some notations on the back of an envelope. Now and again he added painfully a few more figures. He looked prosperous, in spite of his

well-worn suit of dark blue serge, but all the same Phyllis only gave him a seventy.

Behind Freckles was the newcomer for whom they had all been kept waiting—the man in the brown symphony of color. He was at the moment busily engaged in strapping himself in his seat, and Phyllis in spite of herself smiled widely. He saw her, realized that he was the only one in the plane to take this precaution, and looked vaguely uncomfortable.

“Damn,” said Phyllis to herself. “I’ve done it again—and he’s the best bet on this plane.”

His rating would be in the nineties, certainly, for there was an aroma of the easy spender about him, an air of good living. Any man who takes the trouble to match handkerchief to socks, and tie to suit, is apt to interest himself in the other niceties of life, Phyllis had discovered.

Behind him was the redhead in the corduroy trousers. Phyllis never gave her a glance, except to note that at least the girl had sense enough not to use scarlet rouge with that shade of henna.

In the two rear seats of the plane were two young men in turtleneck sweaters and flannel trousers, at the moment busily matching dimes. In ordinary times Phyllis would have rated them at around seventy-five, but since she knew that they were satellites of the man who sat behind her, she gave them an even ninety apiece.

An absolute zero was chalked up for the slick youngster who was leaning across the aisle to talk to the girl in the corduroys. Phyllis had no time for petty larceny, and the redhead had quite evidently taken up her option on him.

That left an even hundred percent for the bored man behind her, but Phyllis wasted no ammunition on him this early in the game.

Slowly Chick swung the stick hard over, and the red-and-gilt flying boat slid away from its mooring. They taxied easily along the waterway, past barges and anchored windjammers, slowly picking up speed. Then the *Dragonfly* swung sharply to port, and the roar of the twin motors became a scream in Phyllis’s ears.

A wall of white water rose against the windows on either side, shutting out the busy harbor world and leaving only these eleven human beings in the darkened box which they optimistically hoped would take them aloft and down again. The *Dragonfly* was skimming the surface like a flung pebble now. Her tail wagged like a salmon’s attempting to leap the falls.

Once she rose in the air, only to fall back with a sickening crash on the crest of the next roller.

The pilot cut his motor down and turned to murmur something unmentionable to French. "Air's goofy again today," he added.

The white wall of water fell momentarily away from the windows and then rose again higher than ever as the motors screamed their loudest. The tail wagged, and Chick rammed the stick into his chest.

"Climb, you damn mud scow!" he implored.

The damn mud scow climbed, skimming above the smooth surface of the next roller and slanting up steeply as the offshore wind lifted beneath her wings. All sense of motion was gone, and the harbor seemed to be lazily pushing its way past beneath them.

"Passing over the battleship *Texas*," French called back into the cabin. The man in brown had his nose pressed against the window. Phyllis, who had no interest in battleships or sailors, seized the opportunity to touch up her lips.

Three hundred feet beneath them a stone-gray battleship rocked at anchor, her decks crawling with busy blue-jackets. One moment all was serene and calm, and then—

Suddenly the battleship *Texas*, together with the blue-jackets on her decks and the motor tenders lined alongside to transport them to the delights of the San Pedro waterfront, all leaped madly toward the plane for a delirious moment, and then fell away to one side with difficulty.

Blonde hair tumbled across Phyllis's eyes, and the lipstick pencil drew a crimson gash across her face. The man with the freckled ears dropped his envelope and forgot that he had ever had it, while the girl in the blue corduroy trousers let out a shrill yip and clutched wildly at the shoulders of the cocoa-colored sport jacket in front of her.

As was the obvious duty of the copilot, Lewis French turned with a somewhat mechanical smile. "Just an air pocket," he began to recite glibly. "Caused by running through a column of cool and descending air."

He swallowed the last of his sentence as the plane suddenly bucked her tail high in the air and regained in one fell swoop all the altitude that she had lost.

From that moment the nine passengers on board the *Dragonfly* lost all traces of dignity, even of individuality. They were peas, shaken in the same pod. Most of them were too busy affixing around themselves the straps that

they had scorned, to notice the white steamer *Avalon*, bound to the city of the same name, when she tooted in salute beneath them as they rocketed past.

“Bumpier every damn trip,” complained French.

Chick showed a mouthful of strong white teeth. Five years with the air mail had burned the seriousness from his hot brown eyes. “It’ll all be nice and smooth when we get Technocracy,” he promised. “They say—”

Whatever it was that they said was forgotten as he braced both feet against the kicking rudder in an effort to keep the *Dragonfly* from going completely crazy. The floor beneath their feet fell away and then rose shudderingly, fitfully swaying from side to side.

The nine passengers in the cabin likewise swayed from side to side, much to their discomfort. Ships plying the sky are capable of inducing in their passengers a *mal de ciel* as much more intense than ordinary seasickness as their speed is greater than that of vessels briny-bound. The *Dragonfly* was making nearly two hundred miles an hour.

Queasiness gripped Phyllis immediately beneath the silver buckle of her plaid jacket, even as it gripped each of the nine. But none of them was hit harder than the man in the brown sport outfit. He began to moan softly, in abject wretchedness.

Jarred out of their shells, the others began to forget their own lesser misery in the sight of his. Phyllis, with the resiliency of her sex, recovered first. From the cellophane bag which had accompanied her ticket she proffered a last remaining pellet of sugarcoated mint.

“Hold everything,” she called, above the din of the motors. “Chew this and see if it helps.”

The man in brown shook his head. He was already chewing gum, his jaws moving mechanically. Drops of sweat were beginning to break out on his forehead.

Phyllis replaced the gum in her handbag and surveyed the sufferer with a sympathetic but critical eye. She was a good judge of types, and she noted instantly the circles beneath his slightly bloodshot eyes, the liver-like tone of his overmassaged skin.

But she hadn’t given up playing Good Samaritan yet. “Always hits you worst when you’ve got a hangover, doesn’t it?” she observed conversationally to the bored man behind her. He had swung his round,

baldish head above the rolled wool of his high-necked sweater to stare with her at the man across the aisle.

The man with the freckled ears likewise had turned, and showed a face mildly apprehensive. He could have been any age from forty to seventy, Phyllis thought, and she noted again the childish blue of his eyes.

He spoke over his shoulder, which he had swung as far forward out of range as was possible, and admonished the man in brown.

“If yu going to be sick, yust use the container.” His deep Scandinavian bass was kind, yet it held an accustomed note of command.

The man in brown uttered another moan. Phyllis turned suddenly and addressed the man behind her.

“How about it, Mr. Tate? What he needs is a *hair of the dog* ...” The plane made another series of breathtaking dips, and when it was on an even keel again, the man she had addressed nodded.

He felt no surprise that this personable young lady with the bright hair happened to know who he was. There was not a blonde in Hollywood who did not know Ralph O. Tate, Paradox Pictures director, by name and by sight—and if there had been a brunette in Hollywood, she too would have known him.

Tate pulled from the hip pocket of his white riding breeches a gleaming silver flask and fumbled for a moment with its complicated cap and mouthpiece. Then he leaned back across the aisle, proffering it to the sufferer in brown.

It was eagerly accepted. Tate held it to the other’s mouth for as long as one might have counted ten, and then took a long pull at it himself.

Phyllis eyed him hopefully, but Ralph O. Tate was used to being eyed hopefully by blondes. He reached to replace it in his pocket.

A hail came from the rear seats, where the two young men, likewise in turtleneck sweaters, had recently been matching dimes. They held out beseeching hands.

“How about it, chief?”

Tate glared back at them. “You know my rule,” he barked. “No assistant of mine does any drinking on location.”

The flask disappeared, and the *Dragonfly* fluttered on through a gusty sky scorned even by self-respecting sea gulls. In spite of all her bouncing, the twin motors on either wing never missed a beat. Steadily the fog-mantled coast line grew smaller behind them, and as steadily a gray-green

mountain rose out of the sea far ahead. They were alone above a dappled ocean with only a grotesque and wide-winged shadow dancing across the waves to keep them company.

Phyllis rested her chin on the back of her seat and turned both of her gray-green eyes full on Mr. Ralph O. Tate. Even if she had missed on sharing a drink with him, she had succeeded in breaking the ice, and she was resolved not to let it close over again.

“Oh, Mr. Tate,” she broke in upon his reverie in a voice a little desperately bright and pleasant—“Oh, Mr. Tate, it seems to be getting quieter now, don’t you think?”

“It *was*!” Tate grunted inhospitably.

Phyllis blinked at that one, but before she had decided upon which retort *not* to voice, there sounded another plaintive wail from behind them.

The man in the brown sport outfit croaked something, in a voice halfway between a choke and a gasp. All of the well-fed, massaged plumpness had been drained from his face, leaving only wide-open eyes and mouth. Whatever temporary respite he had gained through a gulp of Tate’s liquor was gone, and in spite of the fact that the plane had subsided to a gentle rocking, he fought to rise against his straps.

“I’m dying!” he gasped. Above the roar of the twin motors his voice came clear and frightened. “I’m dying—I don’t want to die!”

The other passengers were all turning toward him again, feeling the real chill of the panic which possessed him. Fear can be as contagious as smallpox, and it moves more quickly.

“I’m dying—get me down!”

There is an ironclad rule on every airline that in cases of real or imagined danger the spare pilot takes a seat with the passengers, to reassure them with his own calm acceptance of whatever the situation may be. French didn’t need to have Chick motion him back into the cabin before this whining nuisance got the women hysterical.

He brushed past Phyllis and dropped into the vacant seat. Leaning across the aisle, he placed his hand on the shoulder of the man who thought he was dying.

“You’re all right,” said French cheerily. “Just quiet down now. Why, I’ve been flying ten years, and never died yet.”

The other passengers were smiling now, all tension gone. The frightened man murmured something, lost in the roar of the motors.

“We’re coming up to the landing,” French assured him. “Have you down in a jiffy, and you’ll forget that we struck this bumpy air. Just lean back and relax.”

The other leaned back, but he did not relax. He still seemed to have something to say. French drowned him out with good-natured reassurances.

“Want the container? No? Chew some gum, it helps.”

The man in brown was already chewing gum. His hands moved waveringly toward his face and then dropped to the arms of the leather seat. Phyllis saw that his lips and mouth were almost white. But he was quiet now, staring at the freckled ears of the man in front of him.

“It won’t be long now,” French told him comfortingly.

The plane coasted down on so sharp an angle that Phyllis felt her vanity case slide from her lap. Suddenly the starboard windows showed that they were dropping along the steep slope of a bright green mountain. As if to make up for her bronco-like antics in the air, the *Dragonfly* came to rest on the water in the lee of the cliff softly as a tired sea gull.

A little ahead of them Phyllis saw a half-moon of beach, bisected by a concrete runway that led up to a cheerful little yellow building, bright with colored tiles and landscaped gardens. Beyond the gardens waited an open bus, a bright red bus with a sprinkling of brightly dressed people aboard.

Even the green-blue water through which the *Dragonfly* nosed her way was several shades more brilliant than other water, and the fish which darted away on either side were a bright yellow gold in color.

French brushed past Phyllis again and knelt to spin the crank which dropped two gray rubber doughnuts of landing gear. With a precision that was beautiful to watch, Chick rolled the dripping amphibian up the runway and out upon a concrete turntable. He roared the motors once and then cut them dead.

French ran swiftly back along the aisle and unlocked the door in the rear. Then he looked at his watch.

“Sixteen minutes running time,” he announced. “One at a time please, going out.”

Obediently the passengers filed out, singly. Forgotten was their common discomfort, their common sympathy and terror. French, standing on the cement, helped them to alight, and saw that each took his own baggage.

Phyllis was last, and she came down the step with a bag in one hand and a black case in the other which showed a frantic muzzle behind its wire window.

She put both bags into the hands of the waiting bus driver, turning a deaf ear to the eager whines for freedom. She was looking back, over her well-rounded shoulder, and her eyes were filled with a vague alarm as they met those of the young pilot.

“The man—the man who said he didn’t want to die! He doesn’t get up!” Her voice was puzzled.

French stared at her and then went slowly up and into the cabin, just as Chick appeared in the doorway of the pilots’ room, pulling off his gloves. Together they bent over the man in the brown sport outfit, who had ceased to strain against his bonds.

He hadn’t wanted to die, but he was dead.

CHAPTER II

UP A SLOPING WALK of varicolored tile moved the passengers of the *Dragonfly*, through the landscaped formal garden with its fountain, stone benches, and gay sun-brellas, toward the waiting red bus at the gate. Their transient unity was gone—the kaleidoscope had shaken, and this scattered design of humanity had rearranged itself.

Leading the way, a stained canvas sea bag at his side, was the freckled man with the bright blue eyes. He walked with a swing, glanced neither at the looming mountains nor at the picturesque Spanish villa which served as an office, and spoke to nobody.

Behind him, hand in hand, was the young couple—the girl with the red curls and the youth with the rapt expression and the slickened hair. They were gazing at the dark hump of mighty Mount Orizaba to the west, but they did not see it.

Fourth, fifth, and sixth in the scattered procession came the three men in turtleneck sweaters—the great Ralph O. Tate ahead, carrying a cigarette, and his henchmen close behind, carrying suitcases, brief cases, and still cameras. The seventh was the paunchy T. Girard Tompkins, whose elk's tooth swung wildly as he strode along.

Last came Phyllis La Fond, plaid skirt whipping in the wind. She was still looking back over her shoulder—looking down to the smooth slope of concrete where the *Dragonfly* was poised on its turntable.

As she watched, the white-uniformed figure of Lew French appeared in the door of the plane. His mouth was open. He dropped to the ground, and then set out for the yellow villa at a ludicrous trot. Almost immediately he reappeared and trotted back to the plane, with an older man in a blue uniform and carpet slippers in tow.

As she stood there, halfway between plane and bus, Phyllis sensed rather than saw that up the slope the others were already engaged in a scramble over baggage and seats, sweeping over against the farther rail the three or four sightseers who had ridden out from town to witness the arrival of the *Dragonfly*.

The driver, a round young man whose few and lazy movements threatened constantly to burst the seams of the tight blue overalls which

contained him, was already racing his motor as a gentle hint to hurry her along.

But Phyllis still stared at the *Dragonfly*. In a moment, the blue-clad official half fell out of the plane and came laboring up the walk.

"I'm sorry, ladies and gentlemen," he announced as soon as he could get his breath. "But you'll have to get off."

There was a moment of silence. Then Director Ralph O. Tate passionately inquired as to why the hell must they get off and who the hell said so?

"My name is Hinch," explained the man in blue. "I'm manager of the airline, and we've—we've had an accident. A man has been taken sick, and we'll have to use the bus to rush him over to the town."

There was a note of intensity, almost of desperation, in the voice of Mr. Hinch. But even more compelling than his command was the sight of the man in brown who was being carried swiftly up the walk between the two pilots, his new brown-and-white oxfords scraping on the tile.

"We'll try to get the bus back for you folks just as soon as we can," Hinch promised. "Or—it's just a short walk to the town."

Phyllis looked at her fragile sandals. "Say!" she said. "I'm not going to hike, and I'm not going to stand here in the hot sun—"

She was interrupted by a defiant, decisive voice from the front seat of the bus, where a tall and angular lady had up to now held against all comers the place of honor next the driver.

"Young man!"

Hinch turned from his shepherding of the other passengers, baggage and all, to see a pair of somewhat glittering eyes turned full upon him.

"Young man, that girl is right. I paid my fifty cents for a round-trip ride, and I have no intention of waiting here in this blistering sun, or of walking back either, at my age!"

The age of Miss Hildegarde Withers has been classed as "indeterminate." If so, it was the only undetermined thing about that sharp-tongued but amiable schoolma'am. Her long and slightly equine visage bore traces of recent sunburn, and her temper was as ruffled as the silken scarf of blinding green which fluttered from her neck. In her hand was a sketchbook, with which she gestured, and over her shoulder was an open umbrella of black cotton.

“I came to Catalina for my first vacation in five years—and not to take a walking tour,” she continued. “I have no objection to riding with a sick man, and I’m sure he is too ill to object to a fellow passenger. Besides, I’ve had some experience with first aid, and I might be of some—”

She stopped short as she got her first good look at the man who had been sick. The two pilots were engaged in easing him up onto the rear seat of the bus. Miss Withers got to her feet and gripped the back of her seat with both her chamoisette gloves.

“What’s wrong with him?” she demanded. The timbre of her voice had subtly changed.

Chick looked at French, and French looked at Chick. Then they both looked at Hinch.

“Why—I think it’s a heart attack,” that worthy explained. “We’ve got to rush him to the infirmary at Avalon. It’s quicker than sending for Dr. O’Rourke. Now we’ve got to hurry, will you please—”

Miss Hildegard Withers folded her umbrella and closed it with a snap. Then she edged her way out on the footboard of the bus and stalked back to where the man in brown was lying, face to the sky, along the rear seat.

With a circle of wide, startled eyes upon her, Miss Withers bent over the man who lay staring at the sky. If she flinched inwardly, the bearing of her angular frame did not show it as she stripped off her gloves.

She touched the hand of the man in brown, and then she pressed her fingers to his temple.

“There is no need to hurry,” she said calmly, as she faced them all. “This man is not sick. He is dead.”

There was an audible, frightened gasp from the girl in the blue corduroys. But Manager Hinch protested.

“We can’t be sure ...”

The grizzled man with the sea bag and the freckled ears was standing close beside Miss Withers. His blue eyes were open very wide. “Ay have been forty year at sea,” he said softly. “Ay have seen men die. He was dead on the plane—Ay knew it.”

The pilot Chick ventured a halting question.

“Ay am a faller who minds his own business. Anybody who knows Thorwald Narveson will tell you that.”

Captain Narveson blinked his innocent, China-blue eyes, and stared all around him.

Pilot Lew French broke the stillness. "It was his heart, all right. He was awful sick when he struck the rough air, and scared besides. Told me when he bought his ticket he couldn't stand the air. Said he'd had a bad time coming out on the Transcontinental." The hot California sun was beating down on the upturned, mildly wondering face of the man who centered their attention. French drew off his uniform coat and covered him. "Well, let's get him to Avalon."

The fat youth in the overalls, his hands trembling with excitement, jingled the starter for a long minute before he discovered that his ignition switch was off.

"Seems strange to me that a man who lived through a plane ride across the continent would die of fright on a twenty-minute jaunt like this," Miss Withers cut in. She saw the blue eyes of Captain Narveson upon her, speculatively.

Miss Withers had a strong impulse to mind her own business, following his undoubtedly excellent example. "—if you ask my opinion," she amended a little tardily. After all, this was not her absolute domain in the third grade of Jefferson School back on a side street in Manhattan. She was some three thousand miles from her old friend and onetime fiancé, doughty Inspector Oscar Piper of the New York City Homicide Squad, on whom she had leaned so heavily on the previous occasions when she had been faced with death in its more sudden forms.

To these harried men in uniform she was no more than a meddlesome old maid, and they wasted little effort in concealing this feeling.

"Come on, ma'am," insisted Hinch. "You'll have to get down."

The Withers dander began to rise, and her umbrella appeared, tightly clenched in one hand.

"This man is dead," she repeated softly. "No one knows whether or not it was a natural death. He should never have been moved from the flying machine at all. The best thing you can do is to send for the coroner and the police at once, and let them take charge."

But the others showed no sign of listening to her. Hinch made the mistake of advancing to put his hand on her arm. "Come on, ma'am, get down!"

He stepped back suddenly at the expression in her face.

"Young man," she told him firmly, "I'm sitting right here. Unless you want to put me off?"

Nobody, it developed, wanted to do that. But Miss Withers wasn't through. "I also advise you to send in on this bus all of these people who were on the flying machine. The police will want to question them, and perhaps hold them."

There sounded a shrill squeal from the girl in the blue corduroy trousers, as she seized her young man firmly around the neck. The note of terror in her young voice was very real.

"Marvin! They can't take us to jail on our *honeymoon!*" Her voice hung on the last word, thin and reedy. Luscious brown eyes, behind the sun goggles, were welling with tears. Miss Withers noticed the band of white gold which glittered, brand-new, on the third finger of the girl's left hand, and the schoolteacher's face for a brief second held an expression which might have been either envy or pity, or both.

The young man appeared naturally ill at ease. He tried to reassure the girl who clung to him. "There, there, Kay, honey. Nobody is going to take us to jail."

"Or anywhere else," Phyllis found time to interject. All the same, there was a silver lining. Ralph O. Tate, who was making it clear that he considered the man in brown had chosen to die at this time in a definite plot to hold up his plans, was strolling off moodily toward the shore. Phyllis sensed that the movie director's defenses were temporarily down, and she unhesitatingly moved after him.

Captain Narveson placed his sea bag on the ground, seated himself upon it, and took out and lit a blackened corncob pipe. But Miss Withers still held the fort.

"Somebody has to go along and see to things," she insisted. "This is a case for the police."

Hinch, shaken out of the ingrained politeness which marks every employee of the millionaire who purchased Catalina Island and made it what it is today, drew his breath angrily. And then:

"Madam, you are absolutely right," broke in a calm, dispassionate voice. The man with the elk's tooth, who had kept himself and his paunch well in the background up until now, pressed forward to the side of the bus.

"Bad business, this," he observed to Hinch. The manager looked as if he agreed.

"Hello, Mr. Tompkins. Sorry this happened with you on board to mar your trip."

T. Girard Tompkins waved his pudgy hand. He spoke with all the confidence that a regular weekly commutation ticket on the airline could give him. Regularly during the summer season he came to inspect the island pottery works, which gave him the status of an insider instead of tourist.

“The lady is right,” he decided, nodding toward the belligerent figure of Miss Hildegard Withers. “This is a matter for the authorities. In fact, I believe that I shall myself accompany her to the office of my friend Chief of Police Britt. If you have no objection—”

Mr. Hinch objected very strenuously. “This has got to be hushed up,” he insisted. “It’ll drive the tourists away. Sorry, Mr. Tompkins, but you can’t go. I don’t care if your company does buy up all the pretty pink flowerpots they make down to Pebbly Beach. I’m sending this—this accident case in alone.” He swung on Miss Withers. “Come on, get off that bus. That’s final!”

So it was that Hildegard Withers went rolling through the hills to Avalon village in an improvised hearse. For company she had a frightened, fat chauffeur, a brace of white-uniformed and disgusted pilots, a paunchy distributor of pottery, and a stiffening corpse in a sport outfit of cocoa brown.

CHAPTER III

FROM THE AIRPORT LANDING at White's Beach to the town of Avalon itself is only a matter of two miles of winding macadam road, which skirts the slope of Mount Orizaba itself, swings east toward the shore cliffs again, and finally descends in a long slope to the valley where the new Hotel St. Lena spreads its palm-shadowed balconies.

When the piled grandeur of the hotel and its beaches and tennis courts and promenades is past, there still remains half a mile of shore road, which curves out around a promontory, ducks between a cliff and the tremendous marble pillbox which is Mr. Wrigley's new Casino, and finally loses itself somewhere on Avalon's half-mile of Main Street.

Everywhere, on that bright August morning, a strange and varied assortment of humanity was enjoying itself after its own preferences. Brown-faced gentlemen moved shoreward, bearing the heavy rods and tackle that spell menace to swordfish and leaping tuna. Red-faced gentlemen bore large and shiny golf bags. Little boys swung bright tin pails. Old ladies beamed from wheelchairs—and young ladies beamed from everywhere.

There were girls, girls—thousands of girls. Girls in furs and girls in cotton pajamas. Girls in riding habits, girls in Paris models, girls in homemade frocks—but mostly girls in very little of anything. Young, tanned bodies in the briefest of shorts, with a wisp of silk haphazardly bound across their breasts ... the essence of Catalina.

Discordantly, jarringly, through this swarming hive of humming, workless bees moved the red bus, bearing the body of the man who hadn't wanted to die. Strangely, no other motor vehicle was in sight. The pleasure seekers drew aside to let the bus pass, and then closed in behind it, intent upon their own plans for the holiday. Nobody saw the stiffening figure half covered on the rear seat of the bus, for the simple reason that nobody expected to see such an apparition there. It was as out of place as a ghost in a kindergarten.

Down Main Street, with its clusters of curio stores facing the two high piers, rolled the red bus, and finally came to rest before a small building on

a side street, a modest frame building which flew above its doorway a flag consisting of a white cross on a red field.

Through the door into the infirmary the two pilots swiftly carried their passenger, like a sack of meal. Behind them, on the bus, T. Girard Tompkins turned nervously to the schoolteacher at his side.

“Perhaps it would be better ...” he began.

“It most certainly would,” Hildegard Withers told him decisively. She faced the driver. “Young man, you go find the chief of police. Go on—scat!”

Reluctantly, the fat youth detached himself from his seat behind the wheel and set off down the sidewalk.

Miss Withers took her parasol in a firmer grip and bustled through the door of the infirmary. At the same moment a stiffly starched nurse appeared, concealing a yawn, from an inner room. She seemed a very businesslike young woman, as she stood in the doorway and rocked back and forth on her low and sensible heels.

“Dr. O’Rourke isn’t here,” she was saying. “If it’s absolutely necessary I can get him—”

She caught sight of the limp figure which the pilots had stretched out on the high iron table. “Another sunstroke case? Because if it is, I can take care—”

“You cannot,” cut in Miss Withers. “Call the doctor.”

The nurse went calmly over to the table, lifted the covering and replaced it. Then she nodded. “I’ll call the doctor,” she agreed.

She went to the door, stepped outside, and felt above her head for the lanyard. Then she lowered the flag with the white cross to half-mast.

“A quaint local custom?” Miss Withers inquired with raised eyebrows, when the starched young lady had returned.

“Not at all,” the nurse informed her. “Dr. O’Rourke can see it from where he is. He’ll be here in a minute.”

As a matter of fact, it was something more than three minutes by Miss Withers’s ancient timepiece before a lean and hairy little man, attired in sneakers and a dripping red bathing suit, burst open the door and entered from the street. He ignored the rest of them and faced the nurse, who had retired to a stool in the corner.

“What’s this? Can’t a man have his swim without—” The doctor caught sight of the covered figure on his operating table.

“So?” He removed the covering and surveyed the body of the man in the brown suit.

He held the dangling wrist for a moment and then bent as if to press his head against the dead man’s heart. His lips formed a silent whistle. “Gone, eh?” He replaced the wrist. “Within the last half-hour, I’d say. Looks like a mild alcoholic case, too.” With his fingers he forced the staring eyes wider and scrutinized the pupils. He frowned and then shrugged his shoulders and stepped back.

“You might as well have let me finish my swim,” he complained. “I’m no miracle man; there’s nothing I can do here.”

“You can tell us how he happened to meet his end,” Miss Withers suggested hopefully.

“Maybe I can,” hedged Dr. O’Rourke. He extended a thumb toward the two pilots, who still lingered by the door. “This happen aboard your *Dragonfly*?”

“Half a mile up,” agreed Chick. “He was making a big fuss about being sick to his stummick, and then he went into a howling funk. Yelled something about not wanting to die, and then he was quiet. I figured he’d got under control, and when we landed, we found out that all that’d been holding him up was the straps.”

“There you are,” said Dr. O’Rourke. “Pump played out on him. Doesn’t take much to knock over one of these chronic booze fighters. We can write this down as simple heart failure.”

He replaced the covering on the dead face. Then he went over to a sink against the wall and washed his hands thoroughly with blue soap.

Miss Withers found herself vaguely dissatisfied. “But, Doctor—do you know that this man just made a coast-to-coast plane trip without dying of heart failure? Yet you say he died of fright on a short trip like this!”

“Good Lord, woman!” Dr. O’Rourke stared at her impolitely. “There always has to be a first time for everything. Particularly for dying, you know. Why—” he waxed heavily facetious—“Why, that’s one thing even you have never accomplished!”

Hildegard Withers stared at the hairy little man. There came a look into her eyes which he could not understand. She was remembering a quarter of an hour that she had spent once upon the witness stand in the case of the People of the State of New York *versus* Gwen Lester, and another

moment in the cellar beneath Jefferson School when the murderer of lovely Anise Halloran had crept after her in the darkness.

“Haven’t I!” she said softly.

“You a relative?” The doctor wanted to know.

Miss Withers hesitated at that one.

“Naw, she’s just a kibitzer,” cut in Chick. “Well, that washes this business up as far as we’re concerned. Come on, Lew, let’s get back to the airport. The stiff is all yours, Doc. We’re fed up with him.”

The door slammed behind them. Miss Withers came closer to the hairy little doctor, who was still dripping onto the carpet.

“Wouldn’t a postmortem be likely to show—”

“Postmortem?” He cut her short, irascibly. “Why in the name of the blessed Saint Vitus should there be a postmortem? Just because a stew passes out in a plane instead of in his bed or against a brass rail—”

“All the same, I sent for the chief of police,” Miss Withers told him tartly.

The doctor was fast losing patience. “Look here, are you trying to teach me to run my business?”

Hildegarde Withers sniffed, audibly. She turned and looked out into the street, above a ruffled curtain which covered the lower half of both door and windows. The bus was still there, the two pilots climbing aboard, but there was no sign as yet of the fat youth who drove it, or of the official he had been sent to fetch. T. Girard Tompkins had also taken himself off, presumably to join in the search for his friend the chief.

“Chief Britt will certainly be grateful to you for dragging him away from his store at the noon rush hour,” observed O’Rourke in an edged voice. “The chief just loves to close up his curio shop and trot around on wild-goose chases.”

“Wild geese my Aunt Hannah,” said Miss Withers. She sniffed again. “Young man, I have had the good or bad fortune to have been in contact with several notorious and unsavory cases of homicide during the past two years. Perhaps that poor fellow over there looks like just another case of heart failure to you, but I’m getting so I can detect the very smell of murder.”

A lean forefinger wagged in O’Rourke’s face, and Miss Withers pronounced solemnly, “I can smell murder now!”

At that moment the door opened, and a large nickel-plated shield entered. Pinned to the shield was a large, jolly person whose smallish eyes welled from between rolls of fat, a beaming convivial person who looked like a bartender rather than a limb of John Law.

Behind this dignitary followed a little procession of tourists, sprinkled here and there with natives. As the infirmary door was closed firmly in their faces, they began to billow against the windows, their muffled and excited voices filtering through onto the scene like an offstage-crowd noise. The big man cast at them no backward glance.

“Hello, Doc! How’ya, ma’am?” He nodded cordially in the direction of Miss Withers. “Now what seems to be the trouble here?”

“Trouble enough,” Miss Withers told him. “If you ask me, I’m of the opinion—”

“Of course,” agreed Chief Britt consolingly. “Certainly.” He peered around the room and finally discovered Exhibit A. “Dear, dear! What is it, Doc?”

“Tourist croaked while the *Dragonfly* was coming out,” said the doctor. “This lady thinks it’s assassination.” He snorted and began drying himself with a convenient towel. “Simple case of heart failure.”

“Naturally,” agreed the chief. He approached the white-covered figure. “Naturally,” he echoed himself.

Miss Withers had the impression that his thoughts were very far away, perhaps back in the curio shop which was losing its noon tourist trade. Then the chief suddenly surprised her.

He leaned both pudgy hands on the back of a chair, and blinked. “Who did?”

“Who did? *what?*” The doctor snapped.

“Who died?” Britt inclined his head toward the body.

Miss Withers looked at the doctor, and he looked back at her. “I don’t think anybody inquired into that,” admitted O’Rourke.

“May make a difference,” beamed the chief. “Shouldn’t wonder.”

He rubbed his hands together and moved ponderously toward the body. “Funny he was all alone,” Britt offered, as the nurse drew back the covering again. “They usually come over here with friends.” He hesitated a moment, as if reluctant to violate the secrecy of the dead. “Got to find out who he is before we can tell his folks,” he finished, almost apologetically.

With a certain clumsy system about it, he removed from the pockets of the dead man a heterogeneous collection of odds and ends, which he juggled helplessly in his hands until he sighted a small table against the farther wall of the room, where he dumped them.

“Ought to make a list,” he announced. Miss Hildegard Withers already held sketchbook and pencil in her hands.

“I can take shorthand,” she offered, eager to assist. But Chief of Police Britt held out his hands for the book and pencil.

“Thank yuh,” he said. Then he began a studious enumeration of the dead man’s chattels.

He wrote:

Blk leather billfold, no calling cards, contents fifty-five dollars in fives and tens, parking ticket Terminal Garage, receipt for plane ticket, two newspaper clippings, one eight-cent airmail stamp.

Two letters addressed R. Roswell, Hotel Senator, Los Angeles, unopened. Postmark New York City. One smelly pink paper, the other letterhead legal firm Fishbein, O’Hara, & Fishbein, Park Place, Manhattan.

Change—twenty-dollar gold piece, Canadian quarter, dollar fifty in silver.

Pair of red dice [the chief rattled these thoughtfully as he wrote], fountain pen with initials R.T.F., expensive make, brown silk handkerchief in breast pocket, unmarked. Key ring with two Yale keys and folding corkscrew.

“That seems to be the story,” finished the chief. “Name’s Roswell. Lives over to the Senator in Los Angeles.”

“If his name is Roswell,” pointed out Miss Withers, who was leaning over his shoulder, “then why the initials on his fountain pen?”

The chief of police stared solemnly at the initials R.T.F. “Cuts no ice,” he decided, after ponderous thought. “Prob’ly borrowed it off somebody. Never manage to keep one of the things myself.”

From the hip pocket of his dingy white linen suit, Britt removed a large blue bandanna handkerchief, in which he dumped the articles which he had listed. Then he tied the corners together.

“Got to notify his hotel,” he announced. “Doc, you make out a certificate of death and send it t’ my office so it can go in to the mainland with the corpse tonight.”

O’Rourke had donned a bathrobe, and he looked up from his slippers in surprise. “Where d’you think I’ll get a death certificate? Nobody died here in two years.”

“Make one up out o’ your own head, then,” pronounced the chief. At that moment a hollow siren outside made the windowpanes rattle like castanets. “There’s the *Avalon* now—I got to get back and open up the store —”

“Wait,” demanded Hildegard Withers. “There’s more to it than that. This man Roswell—or whatever his name is—died suddenly under mysterious circumstances. It isn’t exactly any of my business—”

“Hear, hear,” offered Dr. O’Rourke.

“But all the same, it is my honest opinion that this is a case for a coroner.”

Chief Britt smiled, sleepily. “We ain’t got a coroner, ma’am. When there’s any need we use the one over to Long Beach, on the mainland. I’ll send the corpse over to him and if he wants to, he can have an inquest.”

“And by that time it will be everlastingly too late!”

Miss Withers was intense. “All the people who were on that plane when this man died will be scattered.”

“Yes, ma’am, but—”

“But nothing! Hasn’t this town got a mayor or anything besides you?”

“Yes, ma’am. There’s Mayor Peters, and we got a city manager, too, name of Klein. Both of ’em out in Klein’s boat after sea bass and won’t be back for a couple of days anyway.”

Britt stowed his blue bundle away in a pocket of his coat. He began to show that he was impatient to wind up the matter.

“Now listen,” he approached Miss Withers. “You keep saying you think this fellow was killed. Do you see any reason why you think so?”

“She doesn’t see reasons—she smells ’em,” offered Dr. O’Rourke.

Miss Withers sniffed. “Chief Britt, haven’t you ever had a flash of intuition—a premonition—a *hunch*, in other words?”

The chief blinked his tiny, cunning eyes at her. “Yes, ma’am. In poker games. And it costs me money every time.”

The crowd which lingered outside the little infirmary was increasing steadily, and Miss Withers noticed an admixture of newcomers with suitcases and light coats swung over their arms, as the chief opened the door again.

“G’bye, ma’am, g’bye, Doc,” he spoke politely. Then he stopped short and said, “Hello.”

Through the open doorway a shaft of noon sunshine poured into the dark little room, spreading a track of gold across the floor and touching the bared face of the dead man with a semblance of life.

Then the shaft of sunlight was blotted out again, blocked by the square shoulders of a man so tall that he had to stoop in order to enter the doorway.

His face, Miss Withers instantly noted, was handsome, almost too handsome, in a soft way. The eyes were the only jarring feature, for they showed momentarily a flickering, evasive look. Then he smiled apologetically, and the eyes were like other eyes.

“Excuse me,” he said. His voice had an Eastern tang that was almost harsh among these drawling Californians. “They were saying on the pier that somebody had died, but they didn’t know who it was. I expected a friend to meet me here, and he didn’t show up. I wondered—”

“Take a look for yourself,” said the chief hospitably. “Letters in his pocket identify him as being named R. Roswell. Know him?”

The newcomer removed his Panama and moved toward the body. Immediately he became ten years older than his oddly young face, for his hair was streaked with gray. As yet he had no eyes for the doctor or the two women, but stared at the figure which lay on the operating table as if he expected it to rise and salute him.

For a long minute he stared at the face of the dead man. Then he turned toward the others, his handsome face expressionless.

“I was afraid of that,” he said slowly. “It’s my friend—and his full name is Roswell T. Forrest.”

Miss Withers gasped, audibly. The newcomer turned toward her. “I see you know,” he said. “I was his traveling companion—my name is Barney Kelsey.” Then he continued, dully: “We were supposed to make this little outing together, but Forrest missed the boat.”

“But the letters,” protested the chief. “The letters were addressed to him by his first name only?”

“I’ll explain all that. But, first, do you know who—what happened to him?”

Dr. O’Rourke started to speak, but Miss Withers, in a voice that kept him silent, interrupted.

“A paralytic stroke is a terrible thing,” she observed, commiseratingly.

The newcomer’s eyes flickered once as the chief and the doctor stared at each other blankly.

But before they spoke, Barney Kelsey nodded his head.

“Forrest has had trouble like that before,” he went on, swiftly. “The doctors warned him that another attack would be fatal.”

There was a dead silence.

“Oddly enough,” continued Miss Hildegard Withers, “Dr. O’Rourke here discovered no trace of paralysis past or present in the body. My remark was purely general. The doctor leans toward heart failure, at the present moment. My own ideas lead in quite another direction. I suppose your friend Forrest was *also* subject to heart trouble?”

Kelsey’s eyes were those of a trapped animal for a flash, and then they became bland and open.

“On second thought,” he said softly, “I agree with you that Roswell Forrest was murdered.”

“I thought you would,” said Miss Withers.

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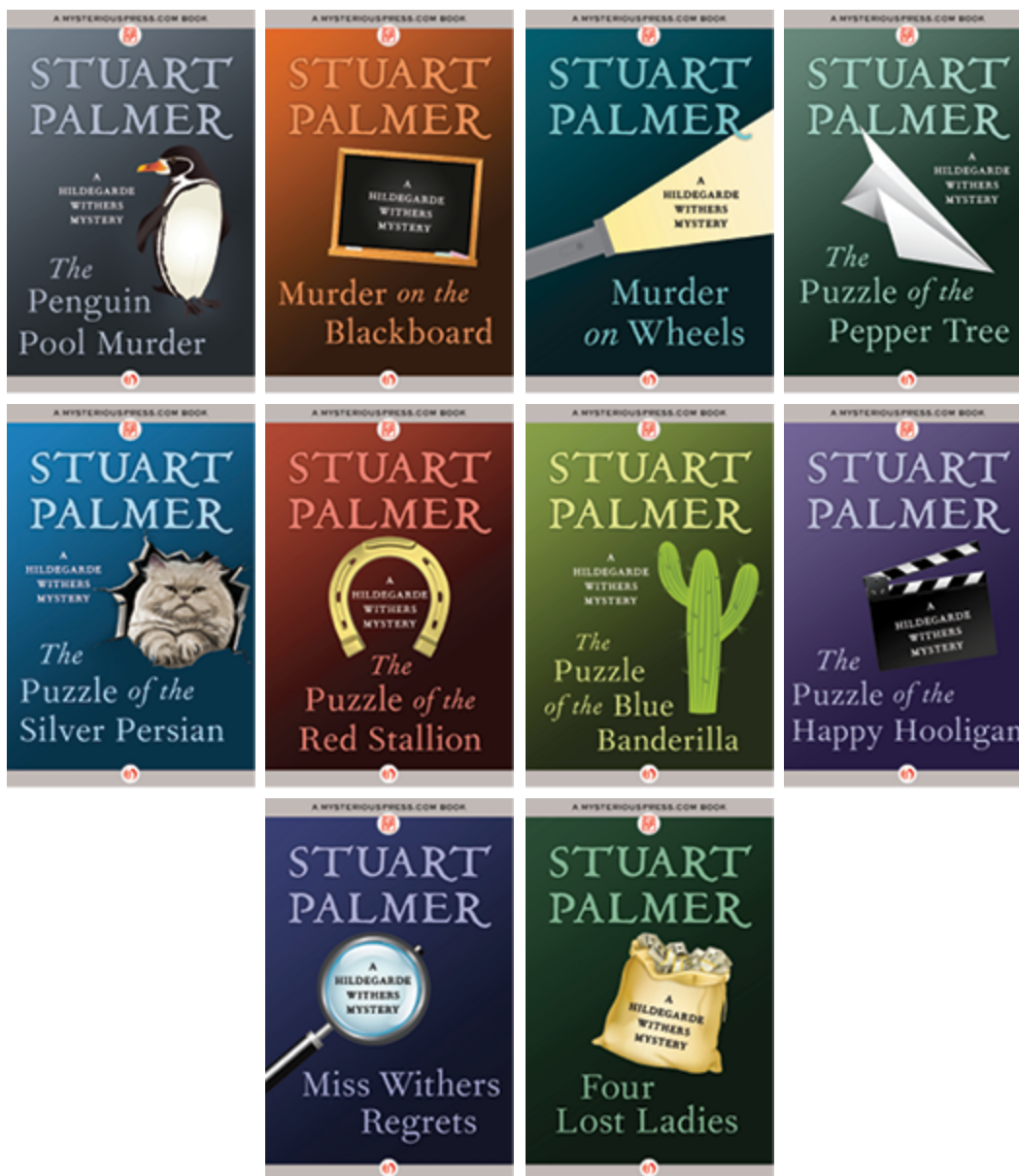
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